

PORTRAIT OF A POPULAR AMERICAN BADMAN:  
JESSE JAMES

An abstract of a Thesis by  
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May 1975  
Drake University

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Jesse James was an outlaw. He was the first and most notorious of that type of horseback desperado that has become identified with the Old West. Jesse James robbed banks, waylaid stagecoaches and shot people. Oddly enough, however, Jesse is not considered a blot on our history, but instead has become one of our legends. This is a remarkable contradiction, but it can be explained. Jesse James' popular public image and appeal was established as the result of the massive exposure his exploits were given in the various popular forms that arose in the last fourth of the nineteenth century—popular histories, dime novels, thick book novels, gazettes and tabloids. These forms declined and disappeared in the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century, but the image that they had created lived on and were translated and perpetuated in one of the most influential of our own popular forms: the movies. The image that was established in those early forms of popular literature has become a permanent American legend.

Although Jesse James was a real bandit, our image of him and his legend is, to a great extent, the product of popular fiction. The real Jesse James of history has become an indistinguishable blur in the shadow of a manufactured and comfortable legend. This study is concerned with showing the influence popular forms of literature had in shaping and establishing this legend. In order to accomplish this, several things have been included in this thesis. The Jesse of history is contrasted to the Jesse of folklore and fiction. The various types of nineteenth century popular literature and their individual types of treatments of Jesse, as well as the interrelationships of the various forms, are shown and explained. The influence these earlier forms have had on Jesse's portrayal in the movies is also demonstrated.

Primary sources were used extensively in this study. Dime novels, thick book novels, popular histories, gazettes, tabloids and films about Jesse James make up the bulk of the primary material used. In addition, letters, diaries and newspapers of Jesse's era were perused, and important sites in Jesse's life were visited. Secondary sources used include histories about Jesse's life and the era he lived in, sociological and psychological studies on the mystique of the West, and studies of Western folklore.

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A Thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Drake University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Ronald R. Stephenson

May 1975

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## INTRODUCTION

On the afternoon of February 13, 1866, a band of horsemen robbed the Clay County Savings Bank in Liberty, Missouri, of \$60,000. This was the first peacetime daylight bank robbery committed in the United States, a fact of rather insignificant historical importance in itself. The real importance of this robbery is that although the bandits were never conclusively identified, it was ultimately attributed to Jesse James as his first crime in a long and notorious outlaw career.

Jesse James was regarded in his own lifetime as the foremost American desperado of all time. He was considered the best in his trade; effective, elusive and original in the method, style and execution of his robberies. He became, in a sense, the superstar of outlawry, who as far as the public was concerned, no other bandit and few gunmen could match. The unsavory fact that Jesse's success was of a criminal nature perhaps kept him from reaching the stature of a folk hero, but by the end of his life he had at least become a legend, and a very popular one.

The details of that legend may be dim now, but the image that the name "Jesse James" brings to mind has not. Few people today could give an account of Jesse's life story

or of his robberies, but to a great many his name at least, along with the names of Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickock and Buffalo Bill Cody, conjures up the image and flavor of the Old West that our popular fiction, both past and present, has taught us: horses and six-guns, outlaws and lawmen. Several factors combined to help Jesse James, and to a lesser extent his brother Frank, attain legendary status.

From early in their careers Jesse and Frank were considered criminal innovators by the public. They were, and still are, credited with the invention and perfection of the art of daylight bank robbery (despite latter-day historical doubts) and of both day and night train robbery, acts that up until then were considered so brazen that they had only been attempted before during wartime in the name and fervor of patriotism.

In addition to being inventive, the style and method the Jameses employed in their robberies was considered out of the ordinary. Their gang was the first band of horseback bandits who after entering a town and robbing its bank at gunpoint, would ride wildly out again, shouting and shooting, which quickly became associated with proper robbery etiquette in the lawless West. Frank and Jesse were considered outlaws, to be sure, but not ordinary ones: their

crimes exhibited some flair.

More important in the eventual establishment of the Jesse James legend, however, was the length of the bandit careers of the James brothers. Jesse and Frank were actively engaged in crime for sixteen years, from 1866 to 1882; neither was ever apprehended by law officers during this entire period. If the Jameses' career had been shorter, or if they had been captured or killed by law officers, they probably would have received only passing notoriety, regardless of their originality and inventiveness, and become mere footnotes to history like so many other equally daring and unusual outlaws and gunmen of that time.

Instead, the criminal longevity of Jesse and Frank James placed them in the unique position of thorough exposure to the American public. In addition, since no one, not even the redoubtable Pinkertons and special state posses, could catch them, their exploits became more remarkable with each passing year. This lengthy and repeated exposure in the newspapers established Jesse and Frank in the collective interest and imagination of the public, and eventually attracted the attention of the then new forms of popular and mass consumed literature of the day—the dime novels, magazines and tabloids—which, more than any other single development in his career, assured Jesse James his



legend.

Public interest in the Jameses and their robberies became widespread over the long years of their careers. It soon became obvious to the various publishers of dime novels, magazines, digests and other popular forms that stories of Frank and Jesse James offered a new and thus lucrative market for their products. The popular publications produced about the Jameses, previously the domain of the newspapers, became tremendously successful and popular in a short time and remained in demand for many years after the assassination of Jesse and the surrender of Frank. The heightened popularity and interest in the Jameses caused by the dime novels and gazettes produced an increased demand for printed renderings of the outlaws' exploits. The public wanted more, and the publishers, to make their products more saleable in the face of increased competition, added exploits, changed or embellished others, and in a short time generally reshaped the minor notoriety and legend of Jesse James into a greater legend composed of far more fiction than fact.

However, the public, both American and European, accepted and perhaps preferred the fiction. Scores of accounts about Jesse James were written and printed into literally millions of copies of the various popular forms.

Jesse James became, and remained years after his death, a solid stock and strong pillar upon which many popular publishing firms depended for their financial well-being. Many mediocre authors became prosperous by writing the continuing legend of Jesse James and selling their fanciful pieces to the publishers of popular fiction. In turn, several publishers amassed fortunes derived in great part from the revenues from mass sales of Jesse James stories. Writers and publishers alike had a financial stake in creating the Jesse James legend and guaranteeing its longevity. Their efforts were beyond their wildest dreams: the legend became permanent.

As the dime novels and related popular forms declined in public appeal in the second decade of the twentieth century, our own particular form of popular and mass consumed fiction—the movies—stepped in to take their place. This shift in popular forms did not damage the then fully established Jesse James legend. The highly fictional framework of the legend that had been developed through hundreds of dime novels may have been partly responsible for making his story flexible enough, and thus adaptable, for the movie screen. Jesse, along with Billy the Kid and others, was readily transferred from pulp to celluloid, along with the West that he represented. Unlike dime novels,

which were mass produced weekly, the technicalities of film production did cut back on the frequency of exposure of the James legend on film. Proportionally, fewer films about Jesse James have been produced than dime novels, but over the years his legend has remained a lucrative and viable topic for film producers and investors. As a result, Jesse's story is still perpetuated and his name is still a familiar one and brings to mind now, though perhaps in less detail, about the same things it did in the 1880's: a daring, wild, ruthless Old West bandit leader who knew no match in the criminal profession.

It is possible that Jesse James' outlaw career was striking enough in itself to have made him a legend. It is equally possible that without the massive exposure he received from the various popular fictional formats that his legend might never have gotten off the ground. Whether or not it was needed in his case, popular fiction did play a major part in making the legend of Jesse James.

The task of investigating and discussing the popular literature and fiction surrounding a legend, and its connection with and influence on that legend, presents two problems: emphasis and history. These two difficulties should be mentioned and understood since they dictate a somewhat altered approach to the topic not normally used in

analyzing literature or literary connected subjects.

In most instances, depending on the slant of the individual, either the author or his works are the subjects under discussion and are emphasized accordingly. If the author is of primary interest, his works are often used to support, substantiate or illuminate various points; if a particular work or group of works is the subject of discussion, the reverse is often true. In the study at hand, however, it is a whole body of popular literature and fiction and its relationship to one particular subject, Jesse James the man and the legend, that is being considered. As a result, individual authors are of little or no concern, while individual writings or works are important only as examples chosen to represent the whole type or class (or, if you will, genre') of popular fiction.

History normally presents few if any real problems to a literary study. Facts about the author's life, the events surrounding the composition of a work, and a general history and understanding of the times in which both existed are often known. This type of factual information can be presented without great difficulty in the study itself or it can be readily obtained elsewhere.

In the case of the legend of Jesse James, however, fact and fabrication are so intertwined that a brief state-

ment would not serve to distinguish history from legend clearly. Despite the fact that it makes the study less convenient to handle, this distinction must be made. If the full impact and influence of popular fiction on Jesse James' story is to be demonstrated, the things about Jesse James that were embellished, adapted from contemporary oral tradition, and fabricated should be known beforehand. In addition, if these distinctions and explanations were made during discussions of the popular fiction itself, unwieldy and confusing digressions would be almost unavoidable.

It therefore seems appropriate to begin this discussion with the facts about Jesse James and compare them with the various facets of his legend.

## PART ONE

### Basic Myth and Bare Fact

#### The Facts

Jesse Woodson James was born September 5, 1847, near the town now called Kearney, in Clay County, of western Missouri. His older brother, Alexander Franklin, had been born nearly five years earlier, January 10, 1843.<sup>1</sup> Frank and Jesse's parents, Robert and Zerelda James, emigrated to Missouri, a slave state, from Kentucky in 1841.<sup>2</sup> Robert James was a Baptist minister and a farmer who was successful at both occupations over the years, managing to increase the size of the family's farm while at the same time helping to start a Baptist-related college in nearby Liberty, Missouri. In 1850, however, the Reverend James undertook a preaching mission to the California goldfields,

<sup>1</sup>Jesse and Frank were not the only children. Robert and Zerelda James also had a daughter, while Mrs. James' later marriage to Dr. Samuel produced two sons and two daughters. Except for their half-brother Archie, however, none of the others play an important role in Jesse's story or legend.

<sup>2</sup>For those incidents concerning the life of Jesse James that are not common knowledge, or needed confirmation of dates, places, or circumstances, William A. Settle, Jr.'s Jesse James Was His Name (Columbia, Mo.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1966) has been used. Mr. Settle's book is the most scholarly, complete and objective of the various histories read or perused in my preparations, and was thus chosen as my basic historical tool.

became ill on his arrival there, and died. Mrs. James remarried twice. The first marriage was to a Benjamin Simms which ended in a separation within a few months followed by Simms' death. In the fall of 1855, she remarried again, this time to Dr. Reuben Samuel who became Jesse and Frank's permanent stepfather.

Up to the time the James brothers turned to crime in the last half of the 1860's, their lives were not markedly different from those of a great many of the other young men living in western Missouri during the same period. Diseases and illnesses all too frequently left families bereft of their natural fathers or mothers. Stepparents were not uncommon. They attended school like other boys until about eighth grade<sup>1</sup> and helped with the farm. The experiences, leanings and activities of the James brothers were the common lot of most boys and young men of that time. The times themselves, in both American and Missouri history, however, were extraordinary.

Sectional disagreements over slavery and states' rights were building toward explosive proportions nationally. Locally, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 which allowed the

<sup>1</sup>Alix Daniels, The Authentic History of Frank and Jesse James, Kearney, Mo., 1973 [mimeographed pamphlet], p. 2.

territory of Kansas to determine its own status as either a free or a slave state led to years of turmoil and finally armed and organized violence along the borders between Kansas and Missouri. Three-fourths of the population of Missouri had emigrated there from the South.<sup>1</sup> Like the Jameses, many Missouri families still shared an ethical and political affinity with the South.

At the outbreak of the Civil War then, it is hardly surprising that Frank James joined General Sterling Price's Confederate Army which was then operating in west central Missouri. However, when Price's Army retreated into Arkansas early in 1862, Frank James stayed behind, turned himself over to Federal officers and was granted amnesty. Late that winter or early in the spring of the next year, Frank again chose to take up arms and joined an irregular unit. By the summer of 1863, he was with Quantrill's guerrillas and that August he accompanied them in the infamous raid on Lawrence, Kansas.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>It should be pointed out to those unfamiliar with the activities in Missouri and Kansas during the Civil War that raids on civilian populations and massacres were not the sole domain of the Confederate guerrillas. A notable example of Union irregular ruthlessness was the burning of Osceola, Missouri, county seat of St. Clair County, on September 23, 1861, by Jim Lane's Kansas Irregulars, veterans of the pre-war border hostilities. Osceola had



In the meantime, things had not gone well in Missouri. At the outbreak of the war, Missouri was split in its allegiances. Staunch Unionists, as well as many with mild Southern sympathies, wished to remain in the Union, while equally fervant supporters of the South wished to secede. No resolution could be reached, so half of the state chose to secede and set up its own state government with its own constitution and capital. As a result, Missouri supplied both sides with troops and both sides included a star for Missouri in their flags. Union troops and militia quickly secured most of the state. However, since a great proportion of the people still favored the South's cause, it became necessary for Union officials to declare martial law in August, 1861, and set up provost marshalls to stop the flow of men and supplies southward and to curtain sabotage against federal installations. Missouri remained under martial law until March, 1865, but in spite of this, irregular and guerrilla units from both previously been used as a supply depot for Price's troops, so Lane's "Redlegs" raided and fired the town. When they were done, only three buildings were left intact, but since Lane ostensibly was acting in the Union cause in Union controlled territory, this, and other terrorist acts committed by "Lane's Brigade" and other groups, was never officially described as a criminal action by Union provosts. By contrast, Quantrill's raid on Lawrence was, and still is, considered a war crime.

persuasions flourished, committing wanton cruelties on "enemy" supporters—farmers and citizens who had been but recently their neighbors. The method both groups of irregulars employed were strikingly similar: burnings, beatings, shootings, lynchings. The only noticeable difference was that the Unionist "Home Guards" could operate relatively free from official censure from their own homes and in the open, while the Southern "Bushwackers" were forced into hiding in the woods and operated furtively.

Although residing in an area that had opted to remain with the Union, Mrs. Samuel remained outspoken and active in her support of the South. In addition, she had a son in first regular and then guerrilla service. As a result, the Samuel family was the target of repeated harassment from the Union "Home Guards" and militia. In the summer of 1863, Mrs. Samuel and her daughter were jailed for a time and Dr. Samuel and Jesse were physically abused by Federal militia attempting to extract information about Frank's guerrilla unit.<sup>1</sup> The harassment and mistreatment received by the Samuel family was not unique,

<sup>1</sup>Various accounts of the method of mistreatment conflict, but although the exact nature of the physical abuse is not definitely known, historians, including William Settle (Jesse James Was His Name, p. 26), agree that it happened.

however. Many other families in similar circumstances throughout the state received as bad or worse. (Things did get bad enough though for the Samuels that they moved early in 1865 to Rulo, Nebraska, for safety and did not move back until after the war's end.) Perhaps partly because of this mistreatment, a teenaged Jesse James left home late in 1863 or early in 1864 to join the guerrillas.

For the remainder of the war Jesse fought with the Confederate raiders, primarily under the command of "Bloody Bill" Anderson. He was wounded twice in the right chest, first in August, 1864, and more seriously in May or June of 1865, after which he was moved to Rulo, Nebraska, to be nursed by his family. The war was already over when Jesse sustained his second wound, but like many of his cohorts he feared retribution and military prosecution. For a short time after the war's end, guerrillas were not extended the offer of amnesty that was routinely given regular Confederate combatants, but instead faced a military tribunal on surrender. Once this hard-line position was relaxed in the late spring, most of the guerrillas came out of hiding and were paroled. Among them was Frank James, who had surrendered in Kentucky.

On their return to Clay County from Nebraska in 1865, the Samuel family and Jesse stopped in North Kansas City

for a time with relatives. Jesse's cousin, Zerelda Mimms, helped nurse him and by the time Jesse left, he and "Zee" were betrothed. Back home on the farm near Kearney, the Samuel family and Frank and Jesse, like most Missourians who had supported or fought for the South, found the conditions during Reconstruction to be difficult. The very nature of the guerrilla warfare in Missouri left deep and bitter scars. The radical provisional government of Missouri passed the Drake Constitution in 1865 which denied all Confederate combatants the right to vote or practice principal professions, while holding them responsible for crimes committed during the war. At the same time, all Union soldiers, including irregulars, militia and home guards, were exonerated for any crimes perpetrated during the hostilities.<sup>1</sup> Historian William Settle perhaps puts the circumstances of those times in their best perspective:

How hostile was the environment in Missouri to which the wartime guerrillas, or even Confederate soldiers, returned in 1865 and later? In most communities, it was as hostile as the men themselves made it. There were instances of wartime acts being avenged, certainly, but almost everywhere, if the returned belligerents became peaceful, law-abiding citizens, they were unharmed. This was true in

<sup>1</sup> Settle, p. 32.

spite of the ugly bitterness that was engendered by the kind of war<sup>1</sup> that had been fought in Missouri.

At least some of the ex-guerrillas were not content to return or contend with this peacetime situation, for on February 13, 1866, the Clay County Savings Bank at Liberty, Missouri, was robbed. Over the next twenty-five months, four additional banks, three in Missouri in the James area and one in Kentucky, were robbed in a similar manner. Although all these robberies were credited to Jesse and Frank James after they became notorious outlaws, there was no evidence at the time these crimes were committed, to prove that the James brothers were involved. In the initial robbery at Liberty, for example, it is highly improbable that Jesse—still recovering from his second chest wound—could have participated.

At any rate, it was not until after robberies at Richmond, Missouri, and Russellville, Kentucky, that Frank and Jesse came under public suspicion. Apparently the authorities did not share this suspicion since the James brothers were highly visible living and working at their mother's farm during this time period and no law officers attempted to arrest them there.

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 31.

On December 7, 1869, however, mild suspicion turned dramatically to hard accusation as one of two bandits who robbed the bank at Gallatin, Missouri, lost his horse in the robbery. This animal was soon identified as belonging to Jesse James. From that time on Jesse and Frank James were hunted men.

Soon after the Gallatin robbery a letter appeared in the Kansas City Times, purportedly from Jesse, denying any guilt in that crime. The Times was co-founded and was edited by John N. Edwards, an important name in the criminal history of Jesse James. Edwards had been adjutant to General Joseph Shelby during the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> A diehard believer in the Confederacy, he accompanied Shelby and his troops into Mexico and stayed there two years rather than surrender at the end of the war.<sup>2</sup> His enthusiasm and praise for the bravery, courage and honor of the Confederate soldier included the Missouri guerrillas. Starting with the Gallatin bank robbery, Edwards was involved in a life-long struggle—which at times seemed more like a crusade—to convince the public that the Jameses and other Missouri bandits were innocent of their crimes.

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Settle, p. 41.

He portrayed these crimes as the desperate reactions of honest men suffering from past injustice and present harassment and maltreatment. In his newspaper articles and books, he also claimed the accusations were Yankee plots for revenge against the fearsome guerrillas.

Eventually other newsmen and writers came to agree with Edwards, and between them the notion that the Jameses were forced into crime became widespread. William Settle notes that: "Many of the 'facts' of the lives of members of the band were first made known by Edwards' pen, to be repeated by other writers unquestioningly."<sup>1</sup> In addition, after each robbery attributed to the James Gang, a "Letter from Jesse" would appear denying his guilt. Ironically, in all but a few instances, these letters appeared in the local newspaper where Edwards happened to be at the time.

Robberies linked to the Jameses and their associates continued, but attempts by local authorities to arrest them ended in failure. By 1871, the Pinkerton Detective Agency had been hired to solve a number of the crimes. The Pinkertons had little better success than the local law enforcement officers, however, and the Jameses remained

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 46.

unapprehended. The tempo of the robbers' activities increased and during a nineteen-month spree between May, 1873, and December, 1874, nine robberies were committed in Missouri and adjoining states, including the Council Bluffs, Iowa, train robbery on July 21, 1873. In later years this crime has been generally accepted as the first of its kind, although history blemishes this image with the record of the Reno Gang's train robbery in Indiana some time earlier.<sup>1</sup> History does not deny, however, that Jesse James and company perfected both train and bank robberies.

Apparently, the state's politicians did not deny this accomplishment either, for in 1874 the question of lawlessness in Missouri became a hot campaign issue in the state elections. Republicans accused the Democrats in power of ineffectiveness and even complacency in dealing with the outlaws. They claimed these robbers had made Missouri—known now as the "Bandit State"—the object of ridicule in other states and slowed immigration and new business and investments.

Despite the Jameses' increased activities and the increased efforts to capture them, Jesse and Frank still were able to maintain some semblance of normality in their

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 47.



lives. Jesse finally married Zee Mimms in April, 1874, while Frank married Annie Ralston, of Independence, Missouri, early that same summer. Over the next five years, Zee gave birth to two children, a son, Jesse Edwards, and a daughter, Mary.

The negative publicity stirred up during and after the 1874 elections, appropriate as it was and in spite of Edwards' exhortations to the contrary, quickly turned to sympathy. On the night of January 26, 1875, detectives—it has never been clearly determined if they were Pinkertons, railroad agents or others—thinking Jesse and Frank were at home and hoping to capture them, fire-bombed the Samuel home. In the ensuing explosion, the Jameses' half-brother, Archie Samuel, was killed and Mrs. Samuel's right arm was shattered resulting in a partial amputation. As usual, Jesse and Frank were not to be found.

The public outcry against this atrocity, fanned by John N. Edwards' fiery articles and editorials, forced an amnesty bill for the Jameses and Youngers to the floor of the Missouri Legislature in March. This bill failed to capture the two-thirds majority necessary for passage. In spite of the bill's defeat, public sympathy and interest in Jesse's and Frank's activities, already running high, hit a new peak.

Later that year (1875) Augustus C. Appler, editor of the Osceola, Missouri, Democrat, and a strong believer in the lost cause of the South, took advantage of the heightened public sentiment and interest by publishing the first book dealing exclusively with the Jameses and Youngers.<sup>1</sup> Entitled Guerrillas of the West, it was a sympathetic account of these outlaws' careers. Appler's book was moderately successful and showed the way for other writers to cash in on the public's interest in the Missouri outlaws. Over the next few years, a rash of books, including Edwards' Noted Guerrillas, or the Warfare of the Border (1877), appeared.

Most of the "histories" were highly slanted in the Jameses' favor and often enormously inaccurate in their "facts." Yet they sold quite well and new, updated, or additional editions were in constant demand. Enough of these James histories were written before and after Jesse's death to make them a substantial sub-genre of the popular literature surrounding him.

While numerous writers and publishers were making money printing the lives and exploits of the outlaws, the Jameses and other Missouri bandits continued to make their

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 180.

livings in the usual manner: robbing banks, trains and stagecoaches. However, on September 7, 1876, their careers received a temporary setback in the attempted bank robbery at Northfield, Minnesota.

The raid into Minnesota was an utter failure. Three of the gang were killed and all three Younger brothers were captured. Only Jesse and Frank James escaped. After the Northfield fiasco, the Jameses were, essentially, the last of the major and original Missouri outlaws. Over the years, most of the rest either had been killed or captured.

For three years after the abortive Northfield robbery, Jesse and Frank were inactive. On October 8, 1879, they ended their temporary retirement by robbing the Glendale, Missouri, train. Over the next two years, four more sensational robberies were chalked up to the Jameses, thereby renewing public interest in their careers.

In addition to book publishers, printers of dime novels finally decided to join the lucrative "outlaw story" field. Frank Tousey's Five Cent Wide Awake Library, issue no. 440, June 27, 1881,<sup>1</sup> was the first of these to hit the market. Other dime novels of all types and format quickly

<sup>1</sup>Charles Bragin, from the cover sheet of the December, 1945, Dime Novel Club reprint of D. W. Stevens' The James Boys in No Man's Land (New York: Frank Tousey, 1891).

followed. Ironically, Tousey's tale was not only the first about Jesse James, but the first about any outlaw in the form of popular fiction.

After his initial appearance as a character in Tousey's dime novels, Jesse added only one robbery, the Blue Cut train robbery in west-central Missouri on September 7, 1881, to his long list. On April 3, 1882, in St. Joseph, Missouri, Jesse James was shot in the back of the head and killed by Robert Ford, a relatively new member of his gang. Popular interest in Jesse did not die with him, however. Instead it soared. A new interest in all the details of Jesse's death emerged, due in part to speculation that Missouri's Governor Crittenden plotted the murder in an attempt to finally rid his state of infamous outlaws.

Six months later the public's suspicion was renewed when Frank James, accompanied by John Edwards, surrendered to Governor Crittenden in Jefferson City, Missouri, on October 3, 1882. For more than two years, Frank was hustled from place to place to stand trial for various crimes. Ironically, in each case he either was acquitted or released.

Finally, on February 21, 1885, the last of the charges against Frank James was dropped. The outlaw

careers of the James brothers, spanning sixteen years,  
some twenty-five robberies and eleven killings, had ended.

### The Myths

The events and atmosphere of the times Jesse and Frank James grew up in were extraordinary. The events and turmoil of the times they lived in as young men following the Civil War were difficult. Yet the events and facts of their personal lives, except for their entrance into a career of crime, were not exceptional.

Even as outlaws, the only truly remarkable aspect of their criminal lives was the inordinate length and success of their career and the unusually large number of robberies committed by them. There is little else in the James brothers' lives that sets them apart from other men, or even other outlaws of that time. Certain episodes of the Jameses' family history certainly may have lent themselves to the formation of the Jesse James legend, but the growth and permanence of the legend was dependent instead on circumstances of time and place that fostered and nourished myths about his outlawry.

The basic and initial myth supporting the legend of Jesse James was and still is that Jesse and Frank James did not choose a life of crime in the aftermath of the Civil War. Rather, the popular belief emerged that they were forced into bandit careers by harassment from vengeful, embittered and jealous ex-Civil War enemies, while a corrupt,

injust and hostile Reconstructionist state government looked the other way. Those that adhered to this belief felt the James brothers were peaceful and innocent men who had been grievously wronged, but since the law itself was in the hands of unsympathetic ex-enemies, Jesse and Frank had no recourse to obtain justice except to take the law into their own hands. Thus they became outlaws themselves.<sup>1</sup>

This myth was basic to the James legend for at least two reasons. First, it took the James brothers out of the category of common criminals and at least made their actions understood, if not partially justified. If instead it had been universally believed that the Jameses had voluntarily become bandits, they no doubt would have attracted attention and even notoriety, but certainly not the support, sympathy and even admiration that many people openly and glibly gave them. Secondly, this primary myth of "forced crime" gave rise to other tales and myths that further supported, justified and illustrated this basic

<sup>1</sup>In John Greenway's Folklore of the Great West (Palo Alto, Calif.: American West Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 336-337, it is pointed out that this is a "classic situation" in American folklore: "The law itself has become a weapon of the Yankee oppressors. To secure justice for himself and his friends, Jesse must live outside the law. Once again, an undesirable social and political situation breeds an appropriate outlaw hero."

mythic premise.

It is not very surprising that the myth gained some prominence and support when one takes into account the events and atmosphere of post-Civil War Missouri. The American Civil War was a tragic conflict. Symbolically, it has been described as a war of brother against brother. In reality, it was a war of American against American. In Missouri, however, the fratricidal symbolism approaches fact, for the split sentiments of the state found fellow statesmen, and often neighbors from the same county, looking down rifle barrels at each other. In the deep South after the war, ex-Confederates were bitter and resentful toward federally imposed Reconstruction governments, but this resentment was aimed primarily at carpetbaggers, blacks and other "outsiders" who had come to power. Communities in the South had been and continued to be of one mind and feeling.

In Missouri, however, the disenfranchised ex-Confederates had no outsiders to blame for their Reconstructionist state government. It was in the hands of neighbors and citizens from their own towns and counties. The proscription of Missouri ex-Confederates by Missouri Unionists was a bitter pill for Southern-sympathizing Missourians. The bitterness bred in the intra-state warfare



was expanded by the radical intra-state Reconstructionist policies.

Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that reports of bank robberies by ex-Confederate irregulars would be viewed with distrust by other sympathizers and ex-soldiers of the beaten South, or that still others, sharing with the ex-irregulars the common lot of bitterness, hardship and frustration, could identify with them and mistakenly justify their acts. In addition, several diehard supporters of the lost cause still in positions of public influence, like John N. Edwards—to whom every Southern soldier was an honorable and gallant warrior—were willing to expound and perpetrate this justification. Finally, the inordinate length of the Jameses' career gave the myth the benefit of long and constant repetition, allowing it to become established not only as a standard justification, but also as the literal truth.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Marshall Fishwick in American Heroes: Myth and Reality (Washington, D. C.: Public Affairs Press, 1954), p. 195, considers Jesse James' situation in this light: "Where the will to believe exists, 'facts' become inconsequential. The blackness of our villains depends at least in part on what the public wants to see. Legends that take hold are those that gratify potential believers. In this way fact is supplanted by fiction and fiction becomes history. A little incident, released by uncorking the bottle of fancy, grows until it becomes incontestable historical truth. The heroic process applies equally to good and bad; only the nature of the end product differs"

In actual fact, Jesse and Frank James had no greater reason to embark on careers of crime than any other Missourian who had suffered through the vicious type of guerrilla warfare carried on throughout the state. Jesse and his family had been the victims of cruelties, indignities and abuse, but to no greater degree than other Southern sympathizers had suffered at the hands of Unionist militia, or for that matter, than Union sympathizers at the hands of Southern guerrillas.

The task of rebuilding peacetime lives in post-Civil War Missouri was hard on everyone. Ex-Confederates and Southern sympathizers admittedly did have greater difficulties and handicaps than their Union counterparts under the short-lived radical Reconstructionist government, but these problems were not insurmountable. In fact, in Jesse's and Frank's case there are indications that they got along after the war better than most. As pointed out earlier, they lived openly at the Samuel farm for four years after the end of the war without being seriously suspected of the first five bank robberies later traditionally credited to them. At the same time, they seemed to have had no difficulties or troubles with their neighbors. William Settle's research indicates that: "Had he (Jesse) and Frank never become involved in postwar banditry, they

could, without any question, have lived peaceably at home. Examples are numerous of former Quantrill men who lived in peace and prospered quietly after the war."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, relations between the Jameses and respectable Clay County apparently were very good. When Jesse and Frank were implicated and later accused of the December, 1869, Gallatin, Missouri, bank robbery, several prominent citizens, including a justice and a future Clay County sheriff, came to their defense by swearing out affidavits attesting to the James brothers good character.<sup>2</sup> The very fact that depositions "that expressed respect for the James Boys could be obtained from citizens of standing disproves any claim that the James Boys had been driven into banditry before this time."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the evidence that Jesse and Frank were not forced into their criminal vocation, the myth became established, aided by John N. Edwards' prolific and imaginative pen. Edwards' tireless attempts to glorify these Missouri bandits and argue their case in innumerable newspaper articles and editorials were instrumental in winning

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>Settle, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

sympathy and considerable public support for the Jameses. Because of the efforts of Edwards and others like him, and the lingering bitterness and distrust in the state, the belief that the Jameses, Youngers and other ex-guerrilla bandits had been victims of persecution grew quickly in popularity.

Of course, not all Missourians or Missouri newspapers chose to believe and embrace this version. The St. Louis Globe, for example, took a dim view of Edwards and the Times impassioned pleas for the Jameses and often attempted to counter them. In the edition of March 13, 1875, the Globe printed an anonymous letter signed "Confederate" that "pointed out that the James boys could have returned to their homes in peace like the rest of the Confederate soldiers, but had deliberately chosen to be highwaymen and killers."<sup>1</sup>

In the face of the emotionalism and sensationalism employed by Edwards and other James supporters, such arguments and evidence proved to be only a temporary restraint in the swing toward the general acceptance of the "forced-into-crime" myth. It is obvious that the myth was and still is preferred to the facts. Latter-day knowledge about and

<sup>1</sup>Greenway, p. 337.

objectivity toward the events of the Jameses' lives and the circumstances surrounding the development of the myth itself is too little and too late to have any real effect on the myth's acceptability and popularity:

The James boys robbed real banks. These desperados, and others like them, have long had faithful followings. Although they were the persecutors and not the persecuted, and as tough a group as one could find anywhere, they were and are still thought of as men who performed brave deeds with skill. Bandits are apt to acquire cults similar to those of Saints. They are venerated and celebrated in song and legend.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the "forced-into-crime" myth was established, a second and related myth began to take shape: Jesse James as an American Robin Hood. Basically, this myth holds that since it was revengeful Yankees that forced Jesse and his brother into crime, he only robbed Yankees or Yankee owned banks, railroads and stage lines. In addition, he often gave the spoils of these robberies to orphaned children, widowed wives of ex-Confederates with mortgage payments to meet, and almost any other ex-Southern sympathizer down on his luck. In other words, he robbed Yankee fat cats and used the loot to help other mistreated and abused victims of Reconstructionist persecution. Jesse

<sup>1</sup> Fishwick, p. 192.

was thus striking a blow not only for himself, but also for the other little people against a corrupt system that included as enemies of these people the Governor of the State (bought by the rich and powerful), the Pinkerton Detectives (hired by the moneyed interest), and state posses (formed at the insistence of Yankee business groups).

The similarities between this view and the Robin Hood myth are so obviously striking they hardly need explanation. The Governor of Missouri = Prince John; the Pinkertons = the Sheriff of Nottingham, while the state posses = lackies; the railroad and bank magnates = rich and corrupt nobility; the ordinary citizens of Missouri = the common Yoemen; Jesse = Robin Hood, while Frank and the other Missouri bandits = Robin Hood's "Merry Men." Episodes of Jesse paying a poor widow's mortgage and then robbing the banker, or of disguising himself and riding with a posse intent on capturing him, or of robbing only rich Yankee preachers, are almost all exact duplicates of episodes from the Robin Hood Tales.<sup>1</sup>

In a sense, once the belief that Jesse and Frank had been forced into crime had gained reasonable popularity, it is not surprising that the myth to make Jesse a Robin Hood

<sup>1</sup>Greenway, pp. 338-339, 341.

figure would follow. In fact, this myth, or one in a similar vein, almost had to develop. The argument that the James brothers' entrance into banditry was unwilling might have been grudgingly believable, but further explanation for their continued criminal activities was necessary to support that belief and keep it viable. If Jesse and Frank were to go on being viewed by the public as basically law-abiding and peace-loving men who had been wronged, simple revenge for themselves in the form of robbery committed against their "persecutors" was not completely acceptable socially. Such an explanation was perhaps understandable, but not necessarily justifiable.

Instead, a more honorable and socially responsible motive developed: after their initial indignation and revenge was satisfied, Jesse and Frank continued their activities purely from a sense of justice, striking blows at a thoroughly corrupt system not only for themselves, but also for other oppressed Missourians. However, as mythical partisans of justice, they could not have kept all the spoils of their raids for themselves. It was both logical and convenient then—and thus hardly surprising—for Jesse's supporters to fit his and Frank's circumstances to the Robin Hood legend. "Such praiseworthy acts (generosity to the poor, etc.) indicate that idealization of the outlaw's

character is understood to be an integral part of the tradition."<sup>1</sup>

It is also hardly surprising that one of the first hints in the development of a Robin Hood image for Jesse came from none other than that tireless and ubiquitous bandit glorifier, John N. Edwards. Three days after the September 26, 1872, Kansas City Fair robbery, a brash and brazen deed, though hardly brave—one little child was wounded from the bandits' gunfire at the crowded fairground; miraculously no one was killed—Edwards published an editorial entitled "The Chivalry of Crime." The "bravery" and "nerve" of the outlaws at the fair inspired him to write that here were "men who might have sat with Arthur at the Round Table, ridden at Tourney with Sir Lancelot, or won the colors of Guinevere. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Edwards' editorial was one of the opening journalistic shots, which eventually became a barrage, to not only justify but also romanticize Jesse and the other Missouri outlaws. It later took only a short literary jump to carry the comparison of these bandits from such figures as Arthur's knights and Scott's Ivanhoe to the Merry Men of Sherwood

<sup>1</sup>Greenway, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup>The Kansas City Times, Sept. 29, 1872.



Forest. In this effort, Edwards "constituted a major influence in transforming Jesse James' public image from a ruthless robber and murderer into a modern Robin Hood."<sup>1</sup>

For more than the century that the Jesse James-as-Robin Hood myth has existed, it has gradually been accepted for what it is: an exciting and enjoyable, but not very believable tale. In light of facts and logic, however, the notion that Jesse James was or could ever have been an American Robin Hood is not only unbelievable but ludicrous. To put it bluntly, Jesse James was no philanthropist.

There are no incidents, historically reliable or otherwise, that show Jesse or any of the other Missouri bandits systematically distributing stolen money or goods to the poor or downtrodden. If this had been the case, after every robbery a rash of people normally with little or no money would have been busy paying off bills, buying much-needed equipment and supplies for their farms with cash, or putting unusually large sums of money into banks. Such unusual activities would not have gone unnoticed, especially in the banking and business community. Yet no evidence of this sort of thing exists. Further, the episodes about Jesse's acts of generosity are few, scattered

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 46.

and isolated, while details of most of them, depending on the version consulted, are sketchy, confused and often contradictory. Jesse and the others undoubtedly gave at least some of their loot to their families and close relations, or to close friends and ex-comrades in arms and their families, but this was the very manpower pool from which the bandit gangs were formed. No doubt they also paid farmers and strangers well for any services, food, lodgings, supplies, or horses they needed (various instances of this are fairly well accepted historically), but with the obvious intent of keeping these people friendly enough that they would not report the bandits to the law. Such gifts and payments, however, do not make Jesse James a Robin Hood. What they do show—and his sixteen-year career without arrest or capture demonstrates this—is that he was a very astute crook.

Yet the notion still persists that Jesse James in his Robin Hood role raided only Union interests, and thus "was a hero to Jackson County and other 'unreconstructed' districts of Missouri—where robbing Yankee banks and trains was regarded with something like equanimity."<sup>1</sup> This notion,

<sup>1</sup>Dixon Wecter, The Hero in America (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1941), p. 351.

reasonably correct in itself, needs to be qualified to be totally accurate.

To begin with, it was only natural for Jesse and Frank and the boys to rob banks and trains; that is where the most money could be gotten. Secondly, in the Civil War's aftermath, it was the pro-Union banks and railroads that first recovered to financial health in Missouri, so it is logical that the healthier, richer banks and roads were picked since the promise of a big haul was more certain. Thirdly, Jesse is credited with robbing two banks in Kentucky and one in Mississippi, and a stagecoach in both Arkansas and Kentucky, none of which can be construed as "pro-Union" interests. Finally, it must be remembered that in those days there was no depositor's insurance, making the ordinary depositors the victims in a bank robbery right along with the firm. Thus, if Missourians looked upon bank robberies in their own state "with something like equanimity,"—and no doubt many did—this feeling was restricted to banks other than their own local establishment.

The Richmond, Missouri, robbery serves as an example. On May 22, 1867, a gang of bandits (Jesse was later accused of taking part) robbed the local bank, killing three local citizens including the mayor, in their shoot-out to escape. One suspect was soon caught and summarily tried and hanged.

Later, two other suspects were apprehended, but never stood trial because an angry mob took them from jail and lynched them.<sup>1</sup> In the letters Jesse purportedly sent to the Kansas City Times, he repeatedly cited this example of vigilante justice as his reason for not surrendering to stand trial and prove his innocence. These letters blamed such mob action on radical Republicans, but it should be remembered that all but a handful of them crossed John N. Edwards' desk before they were printed. At any rate, the Richmond robbery serves to illustrate the point that contrary to the myth, not all Missouri communities considered the bandits' antics as heroic or justified, especially when the bank robbed was their own.

The argument then that Jesse and Frank James were forced into crime is basic to the Jesse James legend, while the notion that Jesse was a latter-day Robin Hood is an almost natural and sympathetic outgrowth of that argument. Through time and use, these two myths have become smoothly interwoven and together they form the substance, background and pattern for the majority of the recountings of the James boys' exploits and robberies. When used to the fullest extent, these combined myths have even been employed to

<sup>1</sup>Settle, pp. 36-37.

explain why each specific bank or train was robbed. In these renderings, there is always a banker (or major business depositor, executive, or even a whole community) who has mistreated or harassed the Jameses (or their friends or relatives or war comrades) either during or after the war. To even things up, Jesse and Frank rob their bank (or train or stagecoach) and if the wrongs are grievous enough, sometimes even shoot the main villain or ringleader.

In addition to these two main myths, there also are a number of minor myths surrounding the Jesse James legend. These lesser or secondary myths are essentially functional myths; tales that serve to either support or illustrate a specific point of the main body of the legend.

According to the legend—and some "histories," especially John N. Edwards' Noted Guerrillas—Jesse and Frank were among the best known and most notorious of the Confederate "bushwackers." Their misdeeds and indiscretions, as well as their prowess and bravery, supposedly made them so well known that their very names struck terror and awe into the hearts of Union troops and ordinary citizens alike. Such infamous war records, of course, fit nicely with the forced-into-crime myth. Notorious guerrillas such as the Jameses naturally would be obvious targets for mistreatment and harassment by embittered and jealous ex-Union militia

after the war. In turn, this abuse hounded Jesse and Frank into crime and at the same time, left them with a whole list of "persecutors" on whom to revenge themselves. This sequence sounds logical enough, but it is nonetheless the product of imaginative retrospect.

An example of the lack of notoriety the James brothers had before they became established bandits can be found in the wake of the Gallatin bank robbery. Reports in the Kansas City Times about the robbery stated simply that authorities had discovered that one of the horses used by the bandits belonged to "a young man named James."<sup>1</sup> Not Jesse James the well known and feared ex-guerrilla warrior, as James' apologists would later have their readers believe, but just "a young man named James."

William Settle's comment on this belief perhaps places the "war hero" myth of the Jameses into the best perspective:

As the war closed, Frank and Jesse James were not notorious. Neither had attained leadership among the bushwackers. Their names were not those that had attracted public or official attention. Hence, one wonders if their later notoriety may not have caused their guerrilla comrades to exaggerate their wartime deeds.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 40; Times, Dec. 16, 1869.

<sup>2</sup>Settle, p. 32.

As a famous desperado, Jesse James' great accuracy with pistols has always been generally accepted. No doubt Jesse was an outstanding shot. The very nature of his bandit profession demanded a better-than-average familiarity and proficiency with handguns. The legend, however, portrays Jesse not simply as a good shot—or even an excellent marksman—but a superhuman sharpshooter. The myth of Jesse's fearsome and deadly wartime career in fact is dependent on this belief.

Among a number of highly doubtful tales of his unerring accuracy are two separate episodes in which Jesse, on horseback in a pitched cavalry engagement, shot and killed a Union leader at the range of 200 yards with a cap-and-ball revolver! This claim is so preposterous that the deed, impossible as it was, pales beside the knowledge that James supporters and writers—including John N. Edwards—repeated it as fact and many of their readers accepted it as such. The truth is the "six-shooter is vastly overrated, largely because the Colt wasn't likely to hit where it was aimed beyond a range of twenty-five to thirty yards. In fact, the old cap-and-ball revolver couldn't equal either the range or deadliness of the Indian bow and arrow. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Joe B. Frantz and Julian Ernest Choate, Jr., The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality (Norman, Okla.:

Jesse James' outlaw career was lengthy and successful, and for those who wish to look at his vocation that way, he deserves the title "Bandit King." As in almost every other aspect of the legend, however, the monetary success of the James Gang's raids has reached mythical proportions. Tradition has pretty well settled on \$600,000 as the combined total taken in Jesse's robberies, though some versions claim the loot was "in the millions." The truth is when the loot from the list of twenty-five robberies generally attributed to Jesse and Frank or both is totaled, it amounts to between \$170,000 and \$195,000 (See Appendix B).

On the other hand, if loot from only the nineteen robberies in which there is reasonable evidence to assume Jesse participated in is added, the sum only ranges from \$80,000 to \$100,000. Admittedly, \$195,00 or even \$100,000 Univ. of Okla. Press, 1955), p. 86.

Experiments on my own confirm this. Using an actual 1851 model Navy colt, standard military issue for both sides in the Civil War, I fired several times at a target ten yards away. I discovered that there was distinct pause between the report of the weapon and the "thwack" of the ball striking the target, confirming this weapon's low velocity. Secondly, my shots all dropped 1 1/2"-2" below the mark aimed at. The same amount of drop in 200 yards would be 30"-40", meaning that for Jesse to hit his target at that range, he would have had to have aimed at an imaginary point at least 6 feet over his victim's head. Even if he had hit the mark, the extreme low velocity of his ball at that distance would have had about as much killing force as a thrown pebble.



was a large sum of money in the 1880's, but hardly close to traditional estimates. This figure diminishes even further when it is divided into five parts, the average number of outlaws usually involved in these crimes. Jesse's share then becomes approximately \$40,000. Average this figure over a sixteen-year career and Jesse James, the "Bandit King," made only about \$2,500 a year as an outlaw. A prince among outlaws perhaps, but a paltry monarch compared to the industrial "robber barons" of that era.

All of these myths, and many others besides, comprise the legend of Jesse James. All of them in one version or another found their way into newspapers, books, histories, stage productions and dime novels. They have been repeated so often in past and present popular literature that the true story of Jesse James has been dissolved and absorbed into the fabric of the myths that make the legend. In many instances, only judicious skepticism and historical objectivity can keep the fact and fiction separated.

Recent attempts to prove the basic falsity of this myth ironically have often led to excesses in the opposite extreme. The result has been that actual events have been discarded and discredited. The large and persistent mythic framework that has been built up around Jesse James apparently has lured many writers into the common mistake of

assuming that since many of the commonly held notions about the Jameses are false, the incidents used to support these beliefs must also be false.

Mistakes and unintentional blunders are common, even in scholarly works. It is often extremely difficult to distinguish between the truth and legend about Jesse James, between the facts and the myths, or even to determine where actual fact ends and myth begins. Much is known about Jesse James, but little of what is known is easily discernable as fact or fiction since at many points these qualities overlap.

## PART TWO

### Jesse James—the Dime Novel Hero

#### General Remarks

The role popular American literature played in establishing the legend of Jesse James cannot be overestimated. Popular literature from 1860 to 1920 was the main force responsible for developing the Jesse James story and making it a permanent part of Western folklore. In view of the character and nature of popular literature and the reading public in the United States during that time, this is not at all surprising.

Although popular literature had existed abroad and in America for some time, the forms that began to appear in 1860 were drastically different from their predecessors. Up to this time, the publishing of popular literature had never been much more than a minor commercial venture. Books were costly to print making their price high and thus keeping sales volume and publisher's profits low. Motivated by the desire for higher profits, an American publisher named Irwin Beadle ingeniously overcame this problem by deserting the familiar and expensive hard-bound format and replacing it with a cheaply produced paper-covered product. This new format resembled present day comic magazines in size and

physical appearance and was sold for only ten cents. Beadle's inexpensive "dime novels" became an immediate success—five million copies of various titles were sold in the first four years<sup>1</sup>—and other publishers quickly followed his lead. Additional inexpensive, cheaply produced formats soon were introduced and popular literature publishing in America rapidly became a flourishing, competitive and highly profitable industry based on mass sales. By the time Jesse James' story first appeared in the popular forms, many of the dime novel publishing houses were each producing 25,000 to 30,000 copies every week!<sup>2</sup> American entrepreneurs had made popular format reading matter inexpensive and easily obtainable and the American public responded by devouring all types of it in massive quantities.

The sudden success of this new type of popular literature, even in the initial stages, surprised and puzzled observers then as much as it does now. The massive sales enjoyed by Beadle's dime novels in the first four years generated so much interest and discussion that the highly respectable North American Review devoted an article

<sup>1</sup>Edmund L. Pearson, Dime Novels: or, Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1926), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>Settle, p. 189.

to them in 1864.<sup>1</sup> This review was "a conscientious attempt to recognize their merits, to point out their defects and understand their popularity."<sup>2</sup> In historic retrospect, the answer to the question becomes reasonably apparent.

Popular literature publishers and writers prior to 1860 had generally depended on public interests and tastes as guides for both their style and subject matters. The books and pamphlets written then were generally topical in nature and ranged in literary quality from good to bad, while the vast majority of them were simply painfully mediocre. There is nothing duller than ordinary topics presented in mediocre prose or verse. The new popular publishers starting with Beadle must have realized this, for their forms dealt almost exclusively with sensational stories and histories of adventure, suspense and romance. The writing contained in them was consistently mediocre to poor, but at least the subjects were exciting and highly readable. Taste as an inspiration for the writers was abandoned along with hard covers. Ramon F. Adams has described these changes in the writers' posture best:

By no stretch of the imagination could

<sup>1</sup>Pearson, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

they be classed as lovers of truth. They merely wrote what was expected of them—and here the word "expect" is of the essence, for it represents not so much a concession to popular taste as it does a hard-pressed hack's view of what the public should have.<sup>1</sup>

Couple the inexpensive mass-produced price of the new formats with this new approach and it would have been more surprising if they had not succeeded with the reading public.

Along with the other tales of action and adventure, the reading public quickly developed a taste for Jesse James stories. Written renderings of his exploits were consumed in huge numbers. It is difficult to tell how many copies of the numerous histories dealing with Jesse were printed after Appler's first account appeared in 1875. Similarly, publication and circulation figures for the various tabloids and gazettes exclusively about the Bandit King are not known. It is possible, however, to get some idea of Jesse's massive exposure and public appeal in popular literature from publishing data surrounding the dime novels.

Frank Tousey and Street & Smith were the two main dime publishers of Jesse James stories. The first Jesse

<sup>1</sup>Ramon F. Adams, Six-Guns and Saddle Leather: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on Western Outlaws and Gunmen (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Okla. Press, 1954), p. 11.

James dime story appeared in one of Tousey's publications in 1881. Over the next eighteen years Tousey devoted 272 weekly issues of one publication to Jesse<sup>1</sup> and in 1901, he introduced The James Boys Weekly which dealt exclusively with Jesse for 139 issues.<sup>2</sup> Street & Smith entered into the competition in 1889 and produced 81 Jesse James issues over the next nine years.<sup>3</sup> Like Tousey, Street & Smith eventually came out with a special weekly called Jesse James Stories that ran for 138 issues.<sup>4</sup>

Together these two publishers were responsible for some 630 Jesse James stories from 1881 through 1904. Considering the average dime novel circulation of those years, that means Tousey and Street & Smith flooded the American reading market with at least fifteen million dime stories about Jesse.<sup>5</sup> If figures from all of the other dime novels and assorted popular forms were available, this astronomical figure would undoubtedly be pushed much higher.

<sup>1</sup>Charles Bragin, Dime Novels Bibliography - 1860-1928 (Brooklyn, N. Y.: Charles Bragin, 1938), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Bragin, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>Settle, p. 189.

<sup>4</sup>Bragin, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Fishwick, p. 193, puts Street & Smith's production of Jesse James Stories alone at six million copies.

Present-day Western historians and memorabilia experts view this phenomenal public exposure in various lights, but they generally agree that "Buffalo Bill is probably the only actual person who figures as a hero in more dime novels than Jesse James."<sup>1</sup> Western historian Marshall Fishwick adds that this is "probably the all-time record for bandit glorifying. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Dime novel expert Charles Bragin's reaction to the profuse Jesse James publications of that era is more down-to-earth: "Frank Tousey made more money publishing James Boys stories, than the bandits did from all their holdups."<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious, however, that the popular forms dealing with Jesse James, despite their glorification of an outlaw, their cheapness and mediocre style, were giving the public what it wanted to read. The popular publishers were businessmen and did not produce stories that would not sell. The millions of copies of Jesse James stories would never have been printed unless a large segment of the American reading audience at that time had been interested in them

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup>Fishwick, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Bragin, from the inside cover of the Dec., 1945, Dime Novel Club reprint of The James Boys in No Man's Land, by D. W. Stevens.



and was willing to buy them. Reasons for this massive public attraction specifically to the Jesse James stories must remain speculative. There is no qualitative or authoritative explanation for it.

It is possible that the Jesse of popular fiction—portrayed as strong willed, independent and vital—appealed to Americans of the 1880's and 1890's because his action-packed exploits freed them for a few brief moments from the fetters of their mundane daily struggles. It is equally possible that readers, especially in the tame, civilized eastern regions, simply found Jesse's "Western" world of six-shooters, horseback riders and rough and tumble lives deliciously mysterious and romantic. By the same token, the appeal may have been that without him, and others like him, "the more or less orderly processes of settlement could have been as dull as neighborhood gossip in a country store."<sup>1</sup>

Any of these or even other explanations may be correct, and probably all of them are to a certain extent. However, regardless of the reason, the fact remains that Jesse James became and remained a very popular character.

The rise of the legend of Jesse James through popular literature may be seen as taking the form of an expanding

<sup>1</sup>Adams, Six-Guns and Saddle Leather, p. 3.

spiral. The notoriety Jesse received from the newspapers prompted publishers of popular forms to use him in their products. These first publications sold well. Additional stories in increased numbers were marketed with the effect of increasing both the extent of the legend and its popularity. Demand increased still further and other publishing firms were enticed to join the market with their issues on Jesse James. This cycle continued until the full potential of the market was tapped and eventually exhausted some forty years later. This mutual cause-and-effect relationship between reader and publisher and publisher and reader resulted in the evolution and permanence of a Jesse James legend that only remotely resembles the Jesse James of history.

Four of the popular forms of that era were particularly instrumental in the establishment, growth and continuance of the legend of Jesse James. These four are the popular histories, the dime novels, the tabloids and gazettes, and the "thick book" novels. Each one is different and deserves individual consideration for its part in building the legend.

### The Histories

Popular histories of Jesse James were abundant throughout this remarkable era of surging popular literature. "Histories"—actually biographical accounts written for popular consumption—sold well but due to their higher price, they never enjoyed the massive sales that the dime novels did. Some publishers in the 1880's did claim sales as high as 65,000 copies<sup>1</sup> for single editions of their Jesse James books, but this hardly approaches the huge blanket exposure of the dime novels.

The role these histories played in the legendizing process was that of ground-breaking and legitimizing. Starting in 1875, the popular histories were the first of the popular forms to capitalize on Jesse's story, and for several years were the exclusive purveyors, other than the newspapers, of printed Jesse James material. Many of these books were written and published while Jesse was still alive and active in banditry, and each new robbery or tale resulted in new chapters and revised editions. This constant addition of episodes approached serialization and had the effect of whetting the public appetite for Jesse James stories, and making them receptive for the later dime and

<sup>1</sup>Settle, p. 184.

gazette offerings. In addition, these histories have given Jesse's legend a certain respectability engendered by public acceptance of the new form.

The popular histories did not share the surface characteristics normally associated with the popular literature of that time, and are not usually thought of or included with it. The cheap, mass produced, paper-covered dime novels and gazettes are the forms most often associated with popular literature of that time. This association is understandable and natural.

The physical appearance and mass circulation of the paper-covered products has made them easily recognizable and familiar. Through long exposure readers have come to expect popular literature to look cheap. The popular histories do not look like most of the popular literature of the era, however. They retained hard or even leather bindings, were published by reputable firms and sold for more than a dollar. These Jesse James histories look like respectable, serious literature should look, and this appearance no doubt helped to make Jesse's story acceptable literary fare.

Despite these trappings of respectability, between their expensive covers these prestigious-looking volumes are not substantially different from the gazettes and other

cheap forms. Inaccuracies, misconceptions, rationalizations, tall tales, myths, twisted facts, half-truths and imaginary conversations are as prominent in most of the popular histories as they are in the dime stories. The hard-bound biographies shared the same sympathetic viewpoint and florid prose style with their cheaper paper-covered cousins. The writing in the histories had more polish, a wider vocabulary and better editing than the dimes, but this was because the demands of weekly publication made such mechanical practices a time consuming luxury the dime novel publishers could not afford. Once the polish is stripped away from the histories, both formats sound remarkably alike. Jesse's biographers professed that they were writing plain truth and fact, but in reality they relied as heavily on emotionalism and nearly as much on sensationalism as the gazettters and dime novelists.

The popular histories written about Jesse James are mechanically and stylistically superior to the dimes, but they are not substantially any more valuable historically. Ramon Adams' research in this field has led him to the same conclusion: "In all truth, one would not need an adding machine to count all the reliable books on the subject; they are greatly outnumbered by the unreliable ones. . . . [N]ever would I have believed, before my investigation began, that

so much false, inaccurate and garbled history could have found its way into print."<sup>1</sup>

Examples from two books of that era, Frank Triplet's The Life, Times and Treacherous Death of Jesse James (1882),<sup>2</sup> and Jesse James, Jr.'s Jesse James, My Father (1899),<sup>3</sup> may better illustrate what the popular histories are like.

One of the most striking characteristics of these books is their title pages. Modern publications use title pages to give pertinent information about the authors, titles, copyrights and publishers. Nothing more or less is expected. In addition to these same kinds of information, the title pages of the popular histories were used to expound on the books' merits and claims. The title page from Jesse James, My Father is a simple one for those times. It modestly assures the reader that the work about Jesse to follow is: "The first and only TRUE STORY OF HIS ADVENTURES ever written." Triplet's title page is less restrained and a better example of those in use. It reads:

The only Correct and Authorized Edition, giving full particulars of each and every dark and desperate Deed in the career of this most noted outlaw of any time or nation / The Facts and Incidents contained in this volume were

<sup>1</sup> Adams, Six-Guns and Saddle Leather, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> (St. Louis: J. H. Chambers and Co.).

<sup>3</sup> (Cleveland: Arthur Westbrook Co.).

dictated to FRANK TRIPLETT, by Mrs. Jesse James, wife of the bandit, and Mrs. Zerelda Samuel, his mother / Consequently every secret Act - every hitherto unknown Incident - every Crime and every Motive is herein TRUTHFULLY disclosed / Truth is more interesting than fiction.

As might be expected, neither book lives up to its title page. Both books could not have been the "only" true or correct version, and in Triplett's case it is extremely doubtful that any of his book was "dictated" by Jesse's mother and widow.<sup>1</sup> Few if any of the popular histories about Jesse James ever came close to equaling the claims made on their title pages. Ramon Adams best expresses the modern reaction to this literary convention:

My chief complaint against such writers is not their fictitious histories, but their attempt at deception by leaning so heavily upon the disarming words "true" and "authentic" in their titles and subtitles. This was their stock in trade. But for the careful reader these misleading words serve as a warning, and rarely do they fail to prove the book so identified to be historically questionable.<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who attempts to read one of these Jesse James popular histories has good reason to be skeptical. Most of them cannot be trusted to deliver the goods. Jesse Jr.

<sup>1</sup> Settle, p. 192; and Adams, Burrs Under the Saddle: A Second Look at Books and Histories of the West (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Okla. Press, 1964), p. 511.

<sup>2</sup> Adams, Six-Guns and Saddle Leather, p. 11.

promises in his preface to set the record of his father's life "straight" and to tell the reader about some of his father's exploits never before made public. Unfortunately, these "new" episodes are simply recountings of his grandmother's versions of extant myths, while the clarification of Jesse's record merely consists of his mother's and grandmother's explanations, excuses and denials of Jesse's various crimes. Most of Jesse Jr.'s remarks about his father that were billed in the book as not being common knowledge in fact are prefaced with "I have heard my folks tell..." or "I have heard my mother [or grandmother] tell...." The "facts" in this book consist of hearsay evidence that is obviously and understandably highly colored and biased. In some instances, Jesse Jr. goes beyond simple bias and attempts to negate known facts. An example of this is his point-blank statement that his grandmother, Mrs. Samuel, was only married twice (p. 23), thus excluding the embarrassing Simms liason, when official records prove conclusively that she was wed three times. It becomes obvious that Jesse Jr. picked only the most favorable accounts, oral statements and tales to "set the record straight." As a result, only the first chapter of the book is original or of any real interest since it is about Jesse Jr.'s own memories of his father. Since young Jesse



was at the tender and impressionable age of six when his father was killed, even this chapter must be viewed with skepticism.

It is remarkable that as unobjective and biased as Jesse Jr.'s account of his father is, it is really no more so than most of the popular histories from this period. Frank Triplett's The Life, Times and Treacherous Death of Jesse James is fairly typical of the sympathetic viewpoint and emotional appeal employed in these books.

Like most of the other "historians" of that time, Triplett relied heavily on the Civil War abuses and related "forced crime" themes to make Jesse's acts justifiable. He relates Jesse's beating by Union militia in 1863 in this manner:

. . . [E]ach stroke of the plow lines upon the delicate body of the boy, still scarce more than a child, might have represented the number of the hecatomb of victims that fell beneath his shots. These strokes found him a boy; they left him a man—no, not a man but a tiger with a fiercer thirst for human gore than the mad man-slayer of the Indian Jungles (p. 27).

Triplett's treatment of this incident serves as a good example, not only of the bias that was in vogue among the writers of that time, but also of the highly colored and embellished style they indulged in.

Triplett was one writer who went to even greater

lengths than simple embellishment of known incidents and oral traditions to underscore this justification theme. In some instances, he went to the extreme of inventing conversations and dialogues to support the "forced crime" argument.

An example of this is Triplett's portrayal of a conversation between Jesse and Jim Anderson which supposedly took place just prior to the Gallatin bank robbery. In this dialogue Anderson has come to the Samuel farm to try to persuade Jesse to take part in the robbery:

"Much obliged, Jim," said Jesse, "but so far I've kept out of that business and don't think I'll take hold now. I know Frank and I have been accused of a hand in everything of that kind that goes; but you know that we are innocent of it, if no one else does."

"Yes," said Anderson, "and I know you are d—d fools to let 'em give you the name and not have the game."

"That may be so, Jim!" said Jesse; "But you see we can prove ourselves not guilty of the others, if we can only be assured of protection against mob violence."

"Assured, H—!" shouted Anderson with a laugh (pp. 67-68).

Jesse does not go with Anderson, but he does sell him the horse that is later caught in the robbery and implicates Jesse. This "conversation" makes a neat documentary package. It not only explains why Jesse's horse was captured at Gallatin, but it also shifts the blame for that robbery to

someone else. At the same time, it makes a claim for Jesse's innocence—purportedly from his own mouth—and shows why he could not turn himself in. It is also completely imaginary. Not all of the popular historians went to this extreme, but most of them did indulge in various sorts of similar excesses to support their arguments.

One of the most common and confusing practices found in the popular histories is the "borrowing" of material and passages from other similar books. Sometimes the original author or source is credited for the lifted material, but as often as not no mention is ever made. There were no copyright laws as we now know them in existence at that time. If one reads enough of these books, he will find himself confronted without warning with passages identical to those found in one or two other works. In some cases, it is almost impossible to tell which book served as the source and which works were the borrowers. Examples of this lifting of material appear in both Jesse Jr.'s and Triplett's books.

In Triplett's book, an anecdote (pp. 374-379) in a "miscellany" chapter is identical to part of a gazette article published at approximately the same time. Triplett's volume is well written overall and has a fine appearance so it would be natural to assume that the author of the cheap-looking gazette was the pirate. The truth is that it

is just as probable that Triplett lifted this information; there is simply no way to tell for sure.

Jesse Jr. relied on large segments of material from other writers for parts of his book, but at least he cited his sources so the validity of these statements can be considered separately from his own. Jesse Jr.'s main source for his chapters about Jesse's wartime exploits, for example, is John N. Edwards' Noted Guerrillas. Unfortunately, Jesse Jr. would have his readers believe that Edwards was the "faithful historian of the guerrilla warfare of the border" (p. 55). Quite bluntly, Edwards' book is simply "not considered reliable."<sup>1</sup>

The frequent and indiscriminate borrowing of both reliable and unreliable information had the effect of garbling the truth about Jesse James. In addition, the liberties these writers took in presenting this information turned into excesses. As a result of these practices, the popular histories are nearly as fantastic as the dime novels. But these excesses were lost in the aura of respectability surrounding the hard-bound format of these books that made almost any new story or version about Jesse acceptable. This respectability in turn seems to have helped pave the

<sup>1</sup>Adams, Six Guns and Saddle Leather, p. 132.

way for easy public acceptance of the more fanciful gazette and dime stories that eventually followed. In the final analysis, the popular "histories" aided the cause of the fictional Jesse James, not the historical one.

### The Dime Novels

Dime novels made the single greatest impact on the eventual shape and popularity of the Jesse James legend. The extent and manner of this influence is easily explained. New dime novel stories were issued and circulated weekly in huge lots. Beginning in 1881, Jesse James stories at first were released sporadically, but as interest in them grew more and more of them were published. In a short time they became so widespread that at least one issue was available to the public almost every week from one or another of the several dime publishers. Jesse James stories eventually became so profitable that several competing firms began to release them as weekly offerings. Within ten years of the publication of the first Jesse James dime story, Jesse's exposure to the public was constant and massive. This weekly flood of Jesse James stories lasted for nearly twenty years.

Some hint of the extent of Jesse's exposure may be seen by looking at circulation figures. As pointed out earlier, millions of copies of these stories were printed and sold. These figures, however, only tell part of the story. Dime novels were cheaply made and designed as a throw-away product, but in those days printed matter of any kind, including back newspaper issues, was prized and kept. Dime novels usually were shared and circulated among friends, or

traded among friends for other stories. As a result, every dime story sold was normally read by at least one or two other persons besides the original buyer, and the audience reached by these stories was far larger than publication figures alone can indicate.

Through this massive exposure Jesse James—as portrayed in the dime novels—became the Jesse James that the reading public came to accept, know and expect. The popular histories had little effect in dispelling this acceptance and expectation, and in fact actually compounded it. As mentioned earlier, imaginary conversations, embellished exploits, florid prose and maudlin sympathy were so common in the histories that the more fictionalized accounts in the dimes are only slightly less believable. The shift from history in the popular biographies—or what in truth was semi-history—to fiction in the dime novels is often hardly perceptible.

It has generally been accepted that the dime novel market was aimed exclusively at adolescent boys, and that it was this youthful audience's enthusiasm for the Jesse James stories that catapulted the outlaw's exploits into legend. These assumptions are far from correct. "The reading of dime novels was not exclusively confined to boys, or to rude and uncultured men. Stories of this type have always been

enjoyed by everybody, except a very small class of persons."<sup>1</sup> Such prominent individuals as Abraham Lincoln<sup>2</sup> and Franklin D. Roosevelt<sup>3</sup> read and collected dime novels.

The last of the "old time" dime novels came off the presses in 1928, and few people today have a clear idea of what they were like. They were about the size and shape of modern comic books and usually contained eight sheets of paper folded in half and printed on both sides in triple columns to make a thirty-two page publication normally containing from 40,000 to 75,000<sup>4</sup> words. They were paper covered and often included a few black-and-white sketches that corresponded to the text. They have been described further as "Briefly—'lurid literature'—of the West, detectives, bandits, etc.—peculiarly American—with lurid cover illustrations."<sup>5</sup> In simpler terms, "they were tales of adventure and combat."<sup>6</sup> At least one of Frank Tousey's

<sup>1</sup>Pearson, pp. 45-46.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Bragin, p. a.

<sup>4</sup>Pearson, pp. 46-47.

<sup>5</sup>Bragin, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup>Pearson, p. 8.



Jesse James series (The James Boys Weekly) was considered so "lurid" that "it was never advertised in his other publications. . . . It was even too lurid for Uncle Sam who denied it finally mail privilege."<sup>1</sup>

Like all the dime novels, the Jesse James dimes did not rely on literary style for their popularity. Instead, the writers and publishers devised formulae which were popular with the public and sold well. Through use, these formulae were welded into a stock set of conventions. A glance at two Jesse James dime novels, The Lives of the Ford Boys<sup>2</sup> and The James Boys in No Man's Land; or, The Bandit King's Last Ride<sup>3</sup> will help to illustrate the nature of these stories. Both of these were written by D. W. Stevens—the pen name for John R. Musick (pen names themselves were one of the conventions)—who is considered one of the best Jesse James dime writers.

Action and mystery rather than plot is what sold dime novels, and the Jesse James dimes had plenty of it. The James Boys in No Man's Land starts with a fist-fight and ends with

<sup>1</sup>Bragin, p.21.

<sup>2</sup>D. W. Stevens, The Boys of New York Pocket Library, no. 87 (New York: Frank Tousey, 1882).

<sup>3</sup>D. W. Stevens, The New York Detective Library, no. 438 (New York: Frank Tousey, 1891).

a chase, gun battle and rescue. Sandwiched in between are two other fights, three additional gun battles, three more captures and escapes (once from Indians), five chases and three attempted murders, while disguises are used or revealed four times. A lot of gunpowder is burned, a few characters get sore heads and several horses are worn out in all this tumult. The Lives of the Ford Boys has considerably less action in it: only one fight, three gun battles, two chases, one capture, two rescues, one robbery, one disguise episode and two murders.

A suspenseful build-up to the action precedes the action itself. Both followed a pattern that is almost always predictable. Below is an example of the usual type of suspense build-up employed in these adventures:

Many were the close calls which Jesse James had during his career.

Again and again he had been wounded, shot down and left for dead to revive and astonish the world afterward with his prowess and daring.

Slowly and cautiously, as panthers and tigers creep on their prey, they advanced toward [the] crater.

Creeping from pitfall to pitfall, from stone to stone, parting tall grass so carefully as scarce to make a greater ripple than would have been imparted by a passing breeze.

Nearer and nearer the dread spot they approach.

Like ravenous wolves their eyes glare at it.

With a cocked pistol in each hand

they crawl nearer, still nearer, and with bated breath and hard set teeth try to see behind the rocks.

Not a word is spoken.

They look all about for their companions, but they are not in sight. This does not intimidate the James Boys. They are used to facing dangers alone, and though they have good reason to respect this new foe, they by no means fear him (No Man's Land, p. 12).

After the proper mood and desired pitch of anticipation is achieved, the action follows fast and furious:

At this moment the conductor and a brakeman were seen running up the cut. The conductor was waving his lantern over his head.

"Hold, come back!"

"Fire on 'em! Shoot 'em down!" And a hundred other shouts went up from the half-dozen bandits who saw them escaping.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

Rang out the pistol-shots, and no less than thirty bullets whistled about the heads of the brave conductor and brakeman.

"Hold, for heavens' sake, don't shoot 'em!" said a brakeman, who was upon the platform of the rear car.

"Why? They are trying to escape!" said Frank James, angrily.

"No, no, they are not. They are just signaling the down freight to prevent a collision."

"Oh, in that case," said Jesse, "they are right. Quit firing, boys" (Ford Boys, p. 14).

This type of action was the bread and meat of the

dime stories. Often the plot consisted of little more than rest pauses, ties and transitions from one such action scene to the next.

Whatever Jesse and Frank James may have been like in real life, the dime writers described them in a manner which was a convention in itself. Jesse and Frank were always strong, hard-willed, coolly deadly and daring. It was not enough that the Jameses were desperadoes; they had to look and act in the dime stories like desperadoes should.

Physical descriptions frequently resembled the following:

Those men were giants in strength. One was tall and slender and the other was tall, but stouter built, but both had muscles of iron, and strong as Oliver Davis was, he might as well have tried to break away from men of iron (No Man's Land, p. 5).

Jesse's reputation and references to the Civil War and outlaw myths normally were described somewhere in the story at least once. Often these subjects were mentioned several times:

The name of Jesse James is familiar in all the civilized world.

The inaugurator of train and bank robberies, the chief among all known outlaws, no wonder Bob Ford was startled to learn he had him for a guest.

Jesse James was the king of the bandits. He took thousands while other highway princes only robbed hundreds.

Millions of dollars had he appro-

priated by himself and those bold,  
lawless men he led (Ford Boys, p. 10).

Ironically, Jesse's abilities as an outlaw and gunman in these stories rarely measured up to the legendary reputation. In No Man's Land, only two minor characters are killed and one is wounded, but neither Jesse nor Frank are responsible for this mayhem. In every instance these deadly marksmen are foiled: a pistol misfires, a horse bolts, or the victim moves. In The Ford Boys, only two men are killed, and Jesse is one of them. Jesse is occasionally shown killing a villain—"villains" being bankers, Yankee vigilantes, rival outlaws, railroad agents or detectives—in some of these stories, but never in numbers that justify the terrific build-ups he usually is given.

The same is true about the robberies. In the dime stories in which actual James gang holdups are portrayed, Jesse is shown as being a master of his trade. In fact, the size of the loot usually is grossly exaggerated. On the other hand, almost all of the purely fictional holdup plans are frustrated by some type of untimely interference. In No Man's Land, for instance, Jesse and Frank carry out three different schemes in succession and do not get a single nickel out of any of them.

Jesse's personality also is described in terms to

match the desperate character he was alleged to be:

"I missed him," said the bandit king. "My bullet failed to do its work, but Oliver Davis and Ike Saunders you had better be careful."

He spoke in a low, hard, hissing whisper. He gritted his teeth in his potent rage and trembled in every limb.

There was never a time Jesse James was more deadly, more dangerous than when he had just failed in some enterprise (No Man's Land, p. 24).

The way in which Jesse's personality is characterized by these writers could lead a modern reader to the conclusion that Jesse James had a split-personality. In one set of circumstances he may be portrayed (as in the above example) as conniving, vicious, deadly and spiteful. On the next page under different circumstances he may be shown as bold, just, courteous and polite. Apparently, the dime writers had little compunction about fitting varying and contrasting personalities to Jesse's characterization if they served the moods of specific scenes. Sales figures for Jesse James stories seem to indicate that Jesse's fans were not disturbed in the least by these inconsistencies.

Naturally, Jesse was described more often and in greater detail than any of the other characters. Types and descriptions of the supporting or secondary characters usually were predictable and brief. There were always a few good,

brave men in these stories (such as a sheriff, detective, or soldier), and these characters were always "bold" and "daring," and each was endowed "with a generous, warm heart, as all brave men have . . ." (No Man's Land, p. 22). There were two types of women. One type was young and beautiful and usually had "a pair of great dark eyes gleaming from masses of ravenblack [or blonde] hair" (No Man's Land, p. 6). The other type was the honest frontierswoman or farmer's wife who normally was shown as "illiterate, ignorant and uncouth in her manner," but this rarely mattered because these women were endowed with "as tender a heart as ever beat in woman's breast" (No Man's Land, p. 17). Villains were always blackguards who were dirty, uncouth, cruel, spiteful, sullen, avaricious and impolite to women; they always drank, swore and used tobacco to excess.

Indians and other non-white characters were given their own brief, conventional characterizations. The Indians' behavior as well as their physical characteristics were predictable:

The Indians laid down as is their custom, and went to sleep, not even putting out a guard. But the redskin is a light sleeper.

As an old frontiersman puts it, the Indian always sleeps with one eye open.

A slight rustling of leaves caused three of them to start bolt upright and lay their hands on their rifles (No Man's Land, p. 14).

Non-white characters were almost always shown as inferiors to the whites in one way or another. Dime writers seem to have taken a particularly bigoted view of the Chinese: "A Chinaman does not take to American horses very much, and he seldom cares to ride one . . ." (No Man's Land, p. 22). Non-white characters thus were often made to look silly and stupid in order to conform with the prevailing racial prejudices of the time.

In effect, these characters had a twofold purpose: they served not only as a foil for the hero (and thus as an incentive for future action), but also as a sinister element that could be easily identified by readers who often viewed Indians, Chinese and other racial minorities with a mixture of suspicion and animosity. By merely referring to a character as a "Chinaman" or a "redskin," a dime writer could create a stereotyped image of treachery or ineptness without the need for lengthy elaboration. Whether done consciously or not, the tendency of dime writers to create and then repeatedly use these quick and easy stereotypes for dramatic effect no doubt contributed to the appeal of their products in a highly class and race conscious society.

Little attempt was ever made in these dime stories at real character development. Jesse's character was always developed to a certain extent, but always in predictable



patterns toward the same conclusions. Occasionally one or two other main characters received some attention and development, but most were simply described in stock, black-and-white terms like those above to support expected actions and behavior. From a practical standpoint this is not surprising. The dime novel was devoted to action, and any real attention to character development would have necessitated deletion of some of the action.

The Jesse James dime story plots were standardized and the characters were conventionalized. Likewise, other literary devices, such as setting, mood and description, also were fit to formulas. Romances of any type followed a particularly strict moralistic pattern, while dialogue was riddled with slang and was simplistic in nature. These stories were stylized to the point that few of them ever offer any real surprises to the reader. Thrills and action are what the dime reader paid for, and that is just about all he got, usually in measured and predictable amounts.

In many instances the stories and characters are so conventionalized and Jesse is so standardized that the story would not be noticeably affected or changed if Jesse James were left out entirely. The only serious difference would have been without Jesse in the title and somewhere in the plot the same story would not have sold as well.

Throughout most of their existence, the dime novels were opposed and attacked on moral grounds by the more sanctimonious elements of society. The bandit stories about Jesse James came under particularly heavy attack. It was argued that these stories incited the young to acts of crime and violence. "Judges and teachers and clergymen and Sunday-school superintendents and even police chiefs began to denounce dime novels. It was the most useful explanation for crime, and the easiest excuse for the offender, until its place was taken by the cigarette and then by the moving picture."<sup>1</sup>

It is apparent that the detractors of these stories never read any of them. If they had, they would have discovered that the dime writers often went out of their way to point out moral issues. In The Ford Boys, for instance, Jesse's impending death at the hand of Bob Ford is treated in this manner:

He, who had so ruthlessly and recklessly murdered so many of his companions in crime; who had murdered by the hundreds ever since 1861 down to 1882, nearly twenty-one years of constant outlawry and bloodshed, must die at last.

God meant it when he said "that he who takes the sword by the sword shall he perish" (p. 27).

<sup>1</sup>Pearson, p. 93.

The negative nature and results of a life of crime is brought up repeatedly in No Man's Land: "Criminals are never honest even to one another . . ." (p. 20). Even pertinent contemporary social criticism occasionally crept into these narratives: "Money is power, and the poor man has little show against the great and rich. He is trampled beneath their feet, as the elephant and ox trample on the insect" (No Man's Land, p. 13). Of course Jesse himself stands as the example of this type of dime novel dogma. In the popular fiction versions Jesse was one man who did stand up to avenge the wrongs committed by powerful and vindictive enemies on him and his family. Since he was a poor man and his enemies had money and position and could control the law, Jesse James' reward for standing up for justice was to be branded an outlaw.

Jesse was glorified in the dime novels, but he was not portrayed as an ordinary bandit. He was the exception. Crime and criminals in general were treated throughout these stories with contempt. "There is nothing more grotesque than the charge that they were 'immoral,' since they were so amusingly strict in their moral standards."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Pearson, p. 8.

### Gazettes and Tabloids

It is difficult to assess to what extent the gazette and tabloid publications influenced the Jesse James legend. Circulation and distribution figures are scarce or non-existent in many cases, so it is difficult to determine just how much exposure Jesse received through these products. No definitive studies have been made concerning the nature of these publications or their particular audience. However, known facts about the format, publishing traits and contents of these types of popular literature do seem to lead to certain conclusions about their part in the legendizing process.

The tabloids and gazettes of that era were similar in size, shape and construction to the present-day National Geographic magazine and had an average length of fifty to seventy-five pages. These publications generally were issued monthly or bi-monthly and normally sold for twenty-five cents per copy. Unlike the dime novels, the tabloids and gazettes were liberally illustrated with dozens of crudely reproduced woodcuts of drawings and sketches and even an occasional photograph.

There were other more substantial differences between the dime stories and the tabloids and gazettes. Dime novel publishers usually produced several lines of dime stories at

the same time. One weekly line would be devoted to Jesse James and other bandits, another to love stories, a third to detective mysteries, yet another to sea adventures, and so on. Frank Tousey, for instance, published thirty-two different "libraries" of stories, most of which were published during the same time period. By contrast, most of the tabloid and gazette publishers had only one or two products each, and each issue normally was devoted to a different topic or subject every two weeks or month. The dimes were highly fictionalized accounts of both real and imaginary characters, but the gazettes and tabloids were confined exclusively to real characters and actual events. As newer subjects became current and stimulated public interest, the tabloids and gazettes would embrace them and milk them for their stories.

These trends and characteristics resulted in the majority of the tabloid and gazette issues dealing with Jesse James being published just prior to Jesse's death and for two or three years afterward—circa 1881 through 1883 or 1884. Gazette and tabloid interest in Jesse seems to have waned once the initial and immediate public craze following his death subsided.

Although publication figures are inconclusive in this instance, it seems probable that the gazettes and tabloids

never enjoyed the same tremendous sales volume that the dime novels achieved. Their very format and publication timetable makes this conclusion logical, but in addition, there seems to have been little or no outcry against these products from the more sanctimonious social groups. If tabloids or gazettes had enjoyed sustained massive sales, these groups undoubtedly would have spoken out against them as they did against the dimes. In all truth, they would have had far better reason.

The dime stories may well be considered fantasies in that they did pander to and depict adventures and violence and were of only mediocre literary quality. Still, as demonstrated earlier, they were basically moral and readable. The gazettes and tabloids were neither. They were normally very poorly written and edited and were blatantly sensationalistic in nature. A few examples may serve to illustrate these points.

Sex was taboo in the dime novels, and love and romance were depicted in a puritanical manner. In most instances lovers were shown doing little more than exchanging longing glances, or a few tender words, or holding hands. Dime writers wanted to excite their readers, but were careful not to offend them. The gazette and tabloid writers did not adhere to this Victorian dichotomy.

One such tabloid is entitled: JESSE JAMES: The Life and Daring Adventures of this Bold Highwayman And Bank Robber and his no less Celebrated Brother FRANK JAMES. Together with the Thrilling Exploits of the Younger Boys (Philadelphia, Pa.: Barclay & Co., ca. 1883). This piece was "written by \*\*\*\*\* (one who dare not NOW disclose his identity)" and claims to be "the only book containing the Romantic Life of Jesse James and his Pretty Wife, who clung to him to the last!" This title sounds tintillating enough and the "anonymous" writer makes good the promises.

Early in this account some of Jesse's Civil War "exploits" are told, including this one: "In the suburbs of the town there lived two notorious women named Tucker. The five [Jesse and four other guerrillas] spent the night at their house, and so abused one of them that she died the next day" (p. 21). Later in this work the author claims that Jesse and Frank fathered some illegitimate children and gives some of the sordid and tragic details of this affair. Things like these simply were not permitted in the "lurid" and "immoral" dime novels.

This brand of sensationalism often approached the grisly, if not the grotesque. This same tabloid contains one episode set during the Civil War in which " . . . Jesse James was at a private home visiting some young ladies. . . . [H]e,

as usual was boasting his prowess. Leaving the house for a few moments, he returned with the throat latch of his bridle, on which were seventeen gory scalps" (p. 22). Needless to say, Jesse's amorous attentions were rebuffed in this case.

At the end of this tabloid, this same morbid tone is used in connection with Jesse's murder:

Some skeptical persons who were aware of Jesse's grim, jocular habit of fixing up a corpse to resemble himself in order that he might get the reward for his death, as had occurred several times before, were very cautious in receiving this story, although James' wife declared that the body was that of the robber chief and his mother corroborated her statement (p. 92).

Fortunately, the homage paid to sensationalism by these publications often was only vulgar instead of grotesque. "The Outlaw Brothers, Frank and Jesse James"<sup>1</sup> is an example. In this issue the anonymous Gazette reporter "interviews" Jesse and Frank and thus is able to relate some unknown "inside" facts, including some of the incidents that occurred inside the Northfield, Minnesota, bank during the robbery:

The bank cashier peremptorily refused to comply with their demands, and to convince him that they were not

<sup>1</sup>Anon., Police Gazette Library, vol. 1 (New York: Richard K. Fox, ca. 1882 or 1883).



triflers, but terribly earnest men, Cole Younger drew his knife gently across his throat, making only a skin-deep scratch.

This did not avail, so far as scaring the cashier into disclosure of the whereabouts of the bank's treasure.

"Damn you!" exclaimed Jesse James, "we can't fool our time away parleying with you. Take that for your obstinacy," and a ball went crashing into the brave cashier's skull.

Without a groan he fell in his tracks, a dead man (pp. 37-38).

Other equally vulgar and bloodthirsty accounts crop up throughout the sixty-seven pages of this Gazette issue.

The attention the tabloids and gazettes gave to sensationalism is matched by their inattention to fact, accuracy and editing. Many of the inaccuracies are minor and obviously careless mistakes. In "The Outlaw Brothers," for example, both Jesse's and Frank's birthdates are incorrect and their mother's maiden name is misspelled, while such important dates as the bombing attack on the Samuel farm are off anywhere from one day to two weeks. Such minor editorial carelessness is for the most part more annoying than important. Other editing mistakes, however, take on ludicrous proportions. The best example of this is found in the account of the Muncie, Kansas, train robbery in "The Outlaw Brothers."

For some reason this robbery is recounted twice, the first time from page 22 through page 23, while the second

version follows immediately and continues through page 24. In the first account the robbery takes place seven miles outside Kansas City "early" in December, 1874, and \$24,000 is taken. By contrast, the second version places the robbery six miles from Kansas City on December 8, 1874, and \$10,000 is taken. In both accounts one of the bandits is later captured, but each telling has different details. In the first version the incarcerated outlaw breaks jail, but is shot by a farmer from a quarter of a mile away. The wounded bandit is hauled back to jail, confesses his crime and implicates Jesse, then dies. The second telling has the outlaw writing a confession which implicates Jesse on advice from his attorney. Only then does he break jail to be shot and killed by a boy in the pursuing posse. No further description or discussion is needed to show the extremely poor quality of the editing found in these publications.

As in the case of the popular histories, "borrowing" of material was a common practice used by tabloid and gazette writers. In Jesse James: The Life and Daring Adventures, sixty-three of this tabloid's seventy-seven pages are lifted from other sources. The man who "must not NOW be known" explains that "I must here acknowledge my

indebtedness to Doctor Dracus' book. . . .<sup>1</sup> I frequently quote from his story" (p.28). The next sixty-three pages of the tabloid are quoted from "Doctor Dracus" without so much as a pause. Interestingly enough, this lengthy quote contains details of Jesse's romantic life, though the anonymous author claims in the title page that his tabloid is "the only book" containing that information.

In many cases, stealing would be a more accurate description of the "borrowing" of material that went on. In the two publications previously cited, there are no less than four instances of direct plagiarism. Everything in these four passages is identical even down to the punctuation marks. Again, as with the popular histories, it is difficult to tell which writer was the victim and which was the thief. Both publications are so choppy and poorly written that either could be guilty. For that matter, it is equally possible that both writers stole these passages from a mutual third party.

Due to the publication practices employed in producing the gazettes and tabloids, the influence these products

<sup>1</sup>I could find no Jesse James book under this writer's name. The closest is a J. A. Dacus, Ph. D., but his book was printed by a different publisher than that mentioned by "anonymous" later in the text.

had on Jesse's legend was probably slight. Their main impact is that they furnished the additional coverage to complete the massive blanket exposure Jesse received from all the popular media forms in the initial surge of public interest following his death. As soon as this first surge subsided and the sensational nature of the details of his death lost some of their color, the gazettes and tabloids deserted Jesse in favor of the next current sensation to come along. For the sake of the legend this is just as well. Despite all their sympathetic excesses, the dime novels were probably closer to the truth about Jesse in most instances than the grotesqueries of the tabloids and gazettes.

### The Thick Books

The "thick" book format was a comparative late-comer to the bustling popular literature field of this period. This form did not emerge and develop until around the turn of the century. These thick books were about the size and shape of present-day paperback books and sold for about thirty-five cents. They were usually just under 200 pages in length. This new form took up some of the market slack left by the gradual decline in dime novel interest toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. However, the thick books never attained the popularity and appeal enjoyed by the dime novel form when the dimes were in their heyday.

Jesse James stories appeared in issues of this new form as soon as they began to emerge. Overall interest in the dime stories may have been waning, but stories about Jesse at least were still in demand. The thick book Jesse James stories followed the dime plots and conventions very closely. The dimes' handling of Jesse's stories had proven successful over the years, and the thick book writers and publishers obviously felt there was no reason for changing a profitable approach.

Action and mystery remained the most important and saleable ingredients, and while stock characters and

descriptions, as well as racial bias and disguise, all stayed in use. However, violence was depicted more explicitly in the thick books than it had been in the dimes.

In William Ward's Jesse James' Greatest Haul; or, the Daylight Robbery of the Russellville Bank<sup>1</sup>, a murdered girl's severed head is thrown through her mother's window. In another of Ward's stories—Jesse James' Race for Life; or, Trailed by Vigilantes<sup>2</sup>—the main villain uses a trained gorilla to murder his enemies. The "gorilla death" is only described once, but it is depicted in such gruesome detail that once is quite enough.

In addition, more people were killed in the plots of the thick books. In Jesse James' Greatest Haul, Jesse alone accounts for fifteen deaths in the course of innumerable gun battles (fourteen of these deserved "getting it," one was an innocent bystander).

However, this increase in violence in the thick books was offset by even stricter moral lessons and a more stringent honor code than those proffered in the dime stories. In Race for Life, for example, Jesse upbraids a fellow bandit

<sup>1</sup>Adventure Series, no. 12 (Cleveland: Arthur Westbrook Co., ca. 1903 or 1904), most likely "William Ward" is a pen name.

<sup>2</sup>Adventure Series, no. 29 (Cleveland: Arthur Westbrook Co., ca. 1905 or 1906).

for betraying and deceiving the heroine:

"Then you lied, lied to a girl whom I had saved, who was under your protection?" thundered Jesse, his face black and terrible to behold. . . .

"But the money! We want the money! Think of it, \$500,000!" . . .

He had counted upon the bandit's love of gold to make him forget thought of all else. . . .

He did not know Jesse James, however!

"\$500,000!" snorted the world-famous desperado. "What's that compared to deceiving such a cracker-jack of a girl? \$500,000! BAH!" (p. 74).

These are thieves and robbers, but Jesse at least behaves honorably. By the same token, Jesse is shown to have a strongly entrenched sense of moral decency. In one episode he discovers a captive white woman who has been sold to a Chinese for a concubine. They are in a labyrinth of tunnels under Chinatown in San Francisco, and Jesse swears to protect her:

"With my life!" replied the world-famous desperado. "So long as my bullits hold out, no one shall so much as lay a finger on you. If we cannot capture one of these devils and force him to lead us from this room, I'll save the last two shells for you and myself!" (Race for Life, p. 24).

The thick book writers also moralized on the unhappy quality of an outlaw's life. In Jesse James' Greatest Haul, Jesse comments on the fate of a villain his gang has captured

but later released:

" . . . [T]hey [the villain's gang] don't know what he confessed, and consequently they will be in constant fear of death and arrest. And to men with no more nerve than they have we who have been hunted for years, know what that means."

Surprised at this insight into his soul . . . , the others of his band understood the desperate yearning their fearless leader had to be allowed to live a quiet, peaceful life. . . .

He had meant to keep the secret longing which gnawed at his soul hidden from his fellows (p. 138).

As in the dime novels, passages such as this one suggest that a life of crime is undesirable, even in the case of the "king" of the outlaws. At the same time, this and similar passages had the added effect of enhancing the "forced crime" myth by fancifully showing Jesse as a decent fellow who would have much rather been a quiet Clay County farmer than a bandit. The thick book writers were deft at this type of sleight-of-hand. They dutifully exhorted the virtues of lawfulness by showing the misery suffered by outlaws but at the same time glorified Jesse James, the outlaw to top all outlaws.

It is impossible to determine if the fabricated morals in the thick books actually counterbalanced their more explicit violence. It is probable that they did not. Aside from this main departure, however, the thick book stories were essentially identical in type, tone and style to the dime stories.



### PART THREE

#### Jesse James: Movie Star

It was no coincidence that the first story film made in the United States (The Great Train Robbery, 1903) was about a band of bandits on horseback robbing a train. By this time outlaw tales in the popular printed forms were an established part of the public's entertainment diet. It was only natural that the earliest producers of "moving pictures" would turn to established and tested stories to attract customers to their new medium. In addition, the broad action afforded by this type of story was better suited to the limited technical capabilities of the then infant film industry.

Jesse and his gang were not the robbers in this first bandit film, but his influence is evident. Popular literature for the twenty years prior to The Great Train Robbery had succeeded in making the Jesse James legend a permanent part of American folklore. Jesse had been popular literature's first as well as most renowned bandit figure. The literary portrayal of his exploits and mannerisms, along with the characteristics and mannerisms of the other characters, eventually became identified by the public as the real essence of the West and the Western badman.

Other real-life dime characters such as Buffalo Bill and Billy the Kid contributed to the image of the West as well, but the public's belief and knowledge of how a bank or train robbery should be done, or what sheriffs and posses were like, or how Western heroes and desperadoes shot, fought, rode, dressed, talked and treated women were fashioned primarily from the Jesse James stories. These ingredients eventually took the form of an unwritten code—the Code of the West—which was adopted by even the earliest film makers in their Westerns, and still exists in Western cinematography today.

Although Jesse was not the subject of the first American film, it was not long before he too made his film debut.<sup>1</sup> These early film makers not only borrowed the style and tone of the earlier popular forms, but were in competition with them as well. It must be remembered that dime novels and thick book stories were still being published twenty-five years after the first screening of The Great Train Robbery. It is reasonable to assume that the increasing popularity of the cinema and the rapid technological advances made in the film industry played a major part in

<sup>1</sup>I was unable to pinpoint the earliest Jesse James film. The earliest reference to such a film is 1911, though it is probable that there were some even earlier Jesse James productions.

the decline and eventual demise of the dime and thick book adventure tales.

As movies grew in popularity and more and more early Westerns and bandit films were released, the same elements of society that had attacked and harried the dime novels began to turn their attention to these adventure movies. "Already there was concern over the Westerns' possible influence on the young, in that it often seemed to glamorize outlawry. Some advertising posters for a Western plugging Jesse James (1911) were heavily censured. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

It was only natural that films about Jesse James and other outlaws would come under the same criticism as the dime novels. The film industry adopted an image of the West from the fantasy-land West created by the dime novelists and other popular writers. In a very real sense, Western films—especially those dealing directly with Jesse James or the other notorious badmen—can be viewed as video versions of the dime stories. The same tone, action, character cliches and moral points exist in the Western movies that were introduced in the old popular forms. "Certainly the Western over its seventy-year history—and especially in the last forty years—

<sup>1</sup>William K. Everson and George N. Fenin, The Western: From Silents to the Seventies, 2nd ed. (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), p. 57.

has clung rigorously to a well-tried set of characters, storylines and situations."<sup>1</sup>

The same sympathies, inaccuracies and misconceptions that revolved around Jesse's legend in the popular forms of the 1870's, 1880's and 1890's also found their way into the movies. A few misconceptions have been added along the way:

In the glamorization of the outlaw Hollywood has contradicted itself on many occasions, in addition to contradicting history. . . . Reconstruction of historical events was and still is changed to suit the script; sympathetic and unsympathetic portrayals of events are often dependent on the importance of an historical character in a specific script.<sup>2</sup>

It is doubtful, however, that the film makers could ever match the years of faithful and repeated distortion of Jesse's history by the old popular literature forms.

The film makers' art has added some of its own special touches to the legend, and has refined and altered the myths to suit the demands of the changing tastes of a fickle movie audience, but the legend and its presentation are essentially the same as they were in the popular literature of a century ago.

<sup>1</sup>William K. Everson, A Pictorial History of the Western Film (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Everson and Fenin, p. 10.

More than twenty-six<sup>1</sup> Jesse James movies have been filmed and released since Jesse first made his film debut. This is not as formidable a record for public exposure as the one the dime novels compiled, but it is still a respectable total considering the changeable nature of the movie-going audience. Among these films may be found some that so closely resemble the old popular literature that they can be considered lineal descendants.

In its early days, film making was relatively simple in technological terms and films about Jesse and other bandits received equal production attention with other subjects. As technology advanced and sound was added, bandit films fell behind and fewer were made. Some studios stopped making bandit films altogether with the advent of sound. Jesse James movies were still being produced but little changes were being made in the craft put into them. In 1939, this trend away from Jesse and the bandit films was dramatically reversed. " . . . [I]t was a concentration on the badmen and a concerted attempt to whitewash such legendary outlaws as Jesse James and the Daltons that really dominated

<sup>1</sup>The actual figure is undoubtedly higher. This number only represents the list of film titles obtainable from such sources as Allen Eyles's The Western: An Illustrated Guide (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1967) and the two film histories already mentioned.

the big-scale Westerns of the early forties. Appropriately, it was Jesse James in 1939 that gave this branch of the Western its biggest boost."<sup>1</sup>

This new surge of Jesse James movies was led by Twentieth-Century Fox, a studio that had abandoned bandit Westerns several years earlier. Fox's Jesse James is perhaps the best known of all the James movies. It was a full length version that was put together by a top director (Henry King) and employed top actors (Tyrone Power, Henry Fonda and Randolph Scott) in the parts. Color film and new and exciting special effects were used. It was even filmed in Missouri to add an extra touch of authenticity. Extra care and expenses had been put into Fox's Jesse James, but these paid off handsomely at the box office as the public turned out in droves to see it. "Fox's huge success with Jesse James brought them back to the Western fold with a vengeance, but with a concentration on outlaw 'biographies'."<sup>2</sup> This financial success inspired other film companies to follow suit, and soon Jesse James movies were being released at the average rate of no less than one a year; a rate that continued for twenty years.

<sup>1</sup>Everson, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup>Everson, p. 178.

For all its popularity, success and attention to authentic details, the 1939 Jesse James was no better from an historical standpoint than the popular histories of the 1870's and 1880's. In fact, this film has much in common with those histories.

Fancy covers and fine paper gave an air of respectability and acceptability to the highly slanted renderings in the histories. Similarly, technicolor, big name stars and a top director equipped with a large budget and special effects gave the 1939 Jesse James respectability and believability. Movie audiences might scoff at the credibility of a cheaply made film with unknown actors, but not a story lavishly presented with such a well-known and admired actor as Tyrone Power. Such a comparison would be unimportant if the film had been any more objective or factual than the popular histories. Jesse James, however, was neither objective nor factual.

This film is presented as a "true story," just as the popular biographies laid their claims to truth, but the film's depiction of Jesse is just as sympathetic as any of the old popular forms. The "forced crime" myth is played for every drop of justification and sympathy that can be squeezed out of it. Jesse and his friends and family are shown hounded from all sides, and it finally gets to the

point where no self-respecting movie hero of Tyrone's stature could hold back any longer. "In Tyrone Power's hands, Jesse was all warmth and nobility, with none of the meanness and killer instinct that apparently characterized the real Jesse."<sup>1</sup> When Tyrone's Jesse is finally pushed and pressured into his first vengeful act, the audience is more than ready to applaud.

The final heinous incident in the film that forces Jesse over the brink is the 1875 bombing of the Samuel home. The screenwriters managed to imbue even more sympathy for Jesse into this scene by manufacturing some "facts" of their own. In the film, the bomb is not thrown by detectives attempting to catch an already outlawed Jesse, but by railroad agents trying to force the family off of their land for a new railway right-of-way. Though this version is totally preposterous, it nonetheless succeeded in winning audience sympathy for Jesse. In it Jesse is portrayed as an average American "little man" who stands up and fights back against the holders of wealth and power for their socially irresponsible acts. Put in this context the film version Jesse naturally gained sympathy and applause from the average post-Depression movie-goer who probably felt somewhat victimized

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<sup>1</sup>Everson, p. 180.



by Big Business himself. Even though most movie historians are unfamiliar with the real facts of Jesse's career, they have sensed that this "screenplay rather overdid the circumstances that forced him into outlawry."<sup>1</sup>

They probably do not realize that this observation is a gross understatement. The convincing justification presented and the sympathy evoked for Jesse in this and other "biographical" films would have made John N. Edwards, Frank Triplet and other bandit "historians" envious.

The nature of films makes their story portrayal dependent on visual impact and character dialogue rather than description. As a result, much of Jesse James consists of conversations and dialogues involving Jesse which are necessarily imaginary and favorable to Jesse. As demonstrated earlier, this was a common practice among many of the popular history writers.

In many instances, the film dialogue is so similar to the fictitious dialogues in the older, popular histories that it is uncanny. Examples of this can be found not only in Fox's Jesse James, but in other film "biographies" as well. Typical of this similarity in dialogues is Paramount's

<sup>1</sup>Everson, p. 180.

The Great Missouri Raid (1950), a color production "B"<sup>1</sup> Western starring Wendall Corey as Frank, Macdonald Carey as Jesse, Ellen Drew as Jesse's wife and Ward Bond as the villain. In this film there is one scene prior to the Liberty bank robbery in which Frank, Jesse, Cole Younger and other ex-guerrillas discuss their alternatives in light of the post-Civil War harassment they are suffering. One of the group argues that: "If we're outlaws [i.e. treated as outlaws] let's get something for it!" Frank counters the proposal by arguing that none of them are guilty of crimes yet, and still might be able to clear their names. His arguments fall on deaf ears, and the others go off to rob the bank. Jesse and Frank do not participate, but are implicated.

This scene and its dialogue is amazingly similar to Frank Triplett's imaginary conversation between Jesse and Jim Anderson mentioned earlier (" . . . I know you are d—d fools to let 'em give you the name and not have the game."). In Triplett's version it is Jesse who refuses to participate in the robbery, but he and Frank are implicated anyway. Such striking similarities would seem to indicate that the popular histories may well have been the source as well as the in-

<sup>1</sup>Although the "B" rating is often associated with cheaply made films, it is actually a length classification meaning a film of approximately 90 to 100 minutes.

spiration for many of the Jesse James films. Regardless of this possibility, it is obvious that the biographical Jesse James films are linked in spirit at least to the old popular histories.

Both sport expensive "covers" or packaging. Both follow the bare chronological essentials of Jesse's life and pass it off as truth even though facts are twisted, or imaginary dialogues are inserted, or subjective emphasis on circumstances is made to present the most favorable and sympathetic image of Jesse possible.

The almost instant success of Fox's 1939 Jesse James enticed other film companies to cash in on the bandit market. Like Fox, some studios concentrated only on biographical films. Others went beyond the historical limitations to make more fanciful stories based solely on certain incidents or myths or parts of the legend surrounding Jesse. Public appetite for these films still was not satisfied so more bandit films were produced. As the market became more crowded, some producers were prompted to turn toward fiction. "An attempt was made by these producers to overcome their competition by loading their pictures with 'gimmicks,' most specifically, controversial new 'versions' of Western history. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Everson and Fenin, p. 307.

Jesse began popping up in stories that were almost entirely imaginary. In many cases, references to incidental and by this time familiar facts about Jesse's life were included only to keep him from coming across like just any other Western character.

The steps in the evolution of these films are reminiscent of the development of the old Jesse dime stories. The dime publishers saw the potential profits that could be made on Jesse from the success of the popular histories. Though fictionalized, the earliest dime entries had been loosely woven around some known facts and actual people in Jesse's life. As the market grew and competition increased, the stories became more and more fanciful and eventually became entirely fictional.

These newer films also were strikingly similar in substance to the old Jesse James dime novels. Some of the movie scripts sound exactly like the dime plots: action heaped on action replete with stock characters. Like the dime novels before them, many of these films employed other fictional characters as the heroes. The parts for these characters as well as for Jesse usually were given to the second ranked but highly familiar actors such as Roy Rogers, Rod Cameron, Dale Robertson and Clayton Moore to enhance their box office appeal.

A typical example of this dime novel type of film is Jesse James at Bay (1941) starring Roy Rogers and Gabby Hayes. Roy of course does not play Jesse, but instead a detective hired secretly to catch the outlaws responsible for a bank robbery. Gabby plays Roy's long-time friend and side-kick. As in the dime stories, Roy and not Jesse is the real hero of the film. Reminiscent of the dime disguise episodes, Roy's true identity as a detective is kept secret from everyone but Gabby. In order to unravel his case, Roy even poses as an outlaw to gain entrance into Jesse's gang. The villains of this film, as they were in a great many Jesse James dimes, are bounty-hunting railroad agents who are trying to catch Jesse and Frank for a price.

The plot has many turn-of-events that are barely convincing, but that matters little since action and intrigue carry the film. In addition to two main chase scenes and one major shoot-out, Jesse and the gang rob a train, and Roy and various other characters are captured and escape several times.

Although Jesse is shown robbing a train, the film drips with sympathy for the old outlaw. He is portrayed as a loving husband and compassionate father at the bedside of his sick child; as a grieving brother after the bombing of the Samuel home at Archie's deathbed (who for some reason is

called "Buster" in the film); as an understanding philanthropist when he and Frank offer to send Roy—who they think is an outlaw—back East to medical school. These factors combine to convince Roy that Jesse is not his man, and at the same time convince the audience that Jesse is not really a criminal at heart. Roy lets Jesse off the hook for the bank job, but since Jesse is still an outlaw and outlaws must come to their just desserts, Roy learns at the end of the film that Jesse and Frank have been apprehended in Kansas City.

The only factual incident about Jesse's life presented in the film is the bombing of the Samuel home. As already mentioned, this incident is used to gain audience sympathy, but it is also used to establish audience identification with Roy. Roy is the good guy, and when he learns of this inhumane act his sense of fair play and justice is aroused. In his indignation and frustration he does what the audience would like to do: he punches the guilty railroad agent in the nose.

The dime novels repeatedly emphasized Jesse's reputation and formidability in their stories. The movies did the same thing with special and visual effects. In Jesse James at Bay, for instance, the price set on Jesse's head is \$100,000, and this figure creeps into the dialogue frequently.

Later, in a scene on a train, a newspaper boy is attempting to hawk his wares, but none of the passengers is interested. As soon as the newsboy starts calling out the latest headline about Jesse James, however, all the passengers immediately jump up to buy a copy of the paper.

Several films like Jesse James at Bay were produced and all exhibit the same basic format. In substance and tone, these films are like reincarnations of the old dime stories: the spirit is the same, only the medium is different. Objections similar to those raised against the dime novels could also be leveled at these films, but in moral terms they are no more or less sensational or harmful or cheap than the old "lurid" literature of the nineteenth century.

Really sensationalized bandit films were on the way, however. Crowding of the Western field resulted in even further and more radical alterations in the basic outlaw plot. The storylines degenerated from fictional to fantastic to utterly ridiculous:

Just as the horror film, to boost flagging box-office interest, was teaming up the Frankenstein Monster, Dracula, and the Wolf Man, so did the Western take to teaming up the James Boys, the Daltons, the Youngers, Belle Starr, and others in medium-budgeters like Badmen's Territory. RKO made something of a speciality of these, with Randolph Scott the overworked marshall striving to maintain law and

order in the face of such all-star banditry.<sup>1</sup>

The shift in public taste toward youth-oriented films in the 1950's dragged Jesse James and the bandit Westerns to even lower depths. The new emphasis was on social and juvenile delinquency, and the film makers attempted to adapt Jesse and the other outlaws to this mold:

In various films, Billy the Kid, the Daltons, and Jesse James became progressively younger in the persons of Audie Murphy, Tom Curtis, Jeffrey Hunter, and other teen-age idols. The True Story of Jesse James has the distinction of being the most historically distorted picture of this group. . . . Tyrone Power had played the outlaw as a somewhat whitewashed Robin Hood, but still and always a man; here, in the more up-to-date version, Jesse became a misunderstood, teen-age hero of Sherwood Forest.<sup>2</sup>

Along with the emphasis on youth there emerged a parallel emphasis on explicit violence and sensationalism. As far as the Jesse James movies are concerned, these changes shift them from resembling dime novels to resembling old gazettes and tabloids instead.

The inordinate interest in youth-oriented films has gradually waned, but a preoccupation with violence is still evident. Interest in Jesse James movies also has waned. Only

<sup>1</sup>Everson, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup>Everson and Fenin, p. 338.



one new Jesse James film has been released since 1960: The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid (1971). This current Jesse James release, however, is characterized by the same violence and sensationalism as the 1950's bandit films. It too resembles the old popular gazettes and tabloids.

The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid is a Universal Studios color release starring Robert Duvall as Jesse and Cliff Robertson as Cole Younger. It is a well made, realistic film. Much of the film is historically accurate, but this close attention to some of the true facts lulls the viewer into accepting the myths and inaccuracies introduced into the film as well. As in the gazettes and tabloids, these outlaws are portrayed more as subjects of awe and fear than of sympathy. From Jesse's first appearance, he is shown as dangerously vicious, grim, bloodthirsty and cold-blooded.

In one scene Jesse acts out the myth of giving a kind widow money to pay her mortgage, and then robbing the banker, but in this version Jesse calmly kills the man and leaves some evidence to implicate the widow. A young outlaw asks him why he wants to cast suspicion of murder on an old lady who has helped them, to which Jesse answers that: "She's a Yankee, too." The implication is that Jesse is deranged, and still thinks he is fighting the Civil War—the same type of juicy tidbit a tabloid writer might have used.

The violence in this film reaches its crescendo in the bank robbery scene at Northfield. This scene is remarkably similar to the Police Gazette rendering mentioned earlier. The robbers have troubles with the bank employees and Jesse loses all patience and control and shoots them. The jig is up and the real gunplay between bandits and alerted townspeople begins. Close-up and slow-motion camera angles of outlaws being riddled with bullets and citizens being shot between the eyes abound. Blood flows and gore drips all over the scene in the same explicit manner the gazettiers were so fond of.

It is no real accident that The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid resembles the tone and spirit found in the gazettes and tabloids. Neither is it an accident that other films so closely resemble the old dime novels and popular histories. The old forms of popular literature simply did not repeat Jesse's legend; they made the legend what it was. The image and the very feelings America has about Jesse James was not merely based on, but manufactured by these forms. The lesson has been learned well, for that nineteenth-century popular literature image is the only image Jesse has ever had. It is still the only image the King of Bandits has, and it is natural that this image with its concomitant feeling would find its way into our own popular form—the movies. It has

only been a question of prevailing public taste as to which tone and style—fictional (dime novel), biographical (popular history), or sensational (gazette and tabloid)—would be adopted to present this familiar image.

## CONCLUSION

### The Bottomline to the Legend

Dime novels and movies have been the two main popular forms responsible for the establishment and continuation of the Jesse James legend. The legend's shape and familiarity as well as Jesse's image are the products of these popular forms. But these forms have not been the only ones to use the legend, they have simply been the most successful exploiters. Almost every imaginable medium at one time or another has taken advantage of public interest in the legend.

Immediately on the heels of Jesse's death, a flurry of plays about the old outlaw appeared on the New York stage. The first of these appeared in April, 1882,<sup>1</sup> and in a little over a year nine Jesse James productions had been staged. Although they became more sporadic as time passed, plays about Jesse continued to appear in New York until 1889. Gimmicks were sometimes employed in these plays just as they were in some of the popular forms. The promoters of The Outlaw Brothers, Frank and Jesse James (1884) advertised that the cast included "the original James horses and Mrs. Jesse James"

<sup>1</sup>George C. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1939) vol. 11, p. 571.

playing themselves.<sup>1</sup> During this seven-year spree, a traveling Jesse James Company emerged which put on profitable James plays throughout the country for several years.<sup>2</sup>

A permanent place in the theater for Jesse was never established, but occasionally plays about him have popped up. A recent example is Elizabeth Bacall Ginty's The Missouri Legend which was first produced in 1938<sup>3</sup> and later revived in 1950.

At the same time Jesse was enjoying his short popularity on the New York stage circuit, the nickel and dime "museums"—ancestors of modern carnival freak shows—also were cashing in. Bob and Charlie Ford exhibited themselves at several of these, advertised as the "slayers of Jesse James, and annihilators of Bandits."<sup>4</sup> There is evidence that Jesse's wife also put herself on display in one of these "museums."<sup>5</sup>

Due to the temporary nature of Jesse's headline value to the newspapers, gazettes and other magazine and news forms,

<sup>1</sup>Odell, vol. 12, p. 473.

<sup>2</sup>Settle, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup>Ruth Gibbons Thomson, Index to Full Length Plays (Boston: F. W. Faxon, 1956), vol. 2, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup>Odell, vol. 12, p. 139.

<sup>5</sup>Odell, vol. 12, p. 338.

front-page articles about him declined rapidly a short time after his death. However, this does not mean that media interest in Jesse waned completely. Human interest stories and historical articles relating to Jesse have continued to appear in newspapers and magazines with reasonable frequency. Recent examples of magazine articles include "Jesse James' Secret Hideout" in the National Police Gazette<sup>1</sup>—descendant of the old popular literature Police Gazette—and "My Father Planned the James Boys Capture" in Frontier Times.<sup>2</sup>

Radio and television have not been immune to using Jesse's legend either. Several radio and television programs in the 1950's were devoted to Jesse, and in 1965, the ABC television network included a weekly Jesse James series in its viewing lineup.<sup>3</sup>

Individuals have attempted to cash in on Jesse as well. Starting immediately after Jesse's death, rumors began flying that the murder was a fake, contrived to free Jesse from constant pursuit by law officers. "According to the granddaughter of Jesse James . . . some seventeen imposters through the years have claimed to be the real, and still unscathed,

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Perlow, Vol. 165, no. 4 (April 1960), pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Riley Shouse, Vol. 33, no. 3 (summer 1959), pp. 16-17 and 40-42.

<sup>3</sup>Settle, pp. 174-175.

outlaw."<sup>1</sup> The latest and most famous was J. Frank Dalton, whose story was made into a book and then a television special in the 1950's.

Soon after Jesse was killed, crowds of people came to the St. Joseph house to gawk and rummage around. Some enterprising people got the bright idea that spectators and tourists might pay to see the place where Jesse James was killed, so they charged admission. Their venture was successful, and since that time several Jesse James "landmarks" have become commercialized. The first bank that Jesse supposedly robbed in Liberty, Missouri, is now called the "Jesse James Bank Museum." The Samuel home in Clay County is advertised as the "James Home" and attracts some 11,000 visitors<sup>2</sup> annually. There has been speculation that the Meramac Caverns in the Missouri Ozarks were used as one of Jesse's hideouts. As a result, an entrepreneur has set up the "Jesse James Cave," complete with an Old West town and museum.

Jesse has even had festivals held in his honor. Pineville, Missouri, filming site of Fox's 1939 Jesse James, puts on a James festival every July, while Kearney, Missouri, Jesse's hometown, has a festival celebration each April. In

<sup>1</sup>Wecter, p. 352.

<sup>2</sup>According to the proprietress, Alix Daniels.

addition to annual events like these, many communities have included re-enactments of Jesse James robberies in their centennial or jubilee activities. Adair, Iowa, for instance, re-enacted a James train robbery in 1973.<sup>1</sup>

People like the legend of Jesse James; something about it is appealing. As long as that appeal has existed other people have capitalized on it and turned a profit. Scholars have attempted to unravel some reasons why the American public has this attraction to the West and Jesse's legend. Their conclusions are many and varied. Some psychologists claim that the audience experiences Oedipal complex, catharsis and phallic gratification-identification in reading about or seeing six-guns and shootouts.<sup>2</sup> Other investigators feel the appeal stems from his exhibition of heroic style which has been described as "a characteristic mode, manner, or method of expression, skill or grace. Umph. Zing."<sup>3</sup> Mythopoeists see

<sup>1</sup>Confirmed historical reference to a James train robbery at Adair is lacking. Many historians feel that the robbery took place much further west. It should be understood, however, that many towns and villages include erroneous Jesse James robberies in their historical celebrations.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth J. Munden, M. D., "A Contribution to the Psychological Understand of the Cowboy and his Myth," American Imago, vol. 15, no. 2 (summer 1958), pp. 103-148.

<sup>3</sup>Marshall Fishwick, The Hero, American Style (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1969), p. 12.



Jesse and his Western setting as typical of the age-old struggles of "man versus man, man versus Nature, man versus environment, man versus emotion, man versus temptation, man lonely, man in harness, man in motion."<sup>1</sup> Humanists from varied fields, including psychology, see the appeal of the West and Jesse not in what the legend contains, but in the "reassuring regularity of the form itself,"<sup>2</sup> or the "certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence."<sup>3</sup>

The very diversity of explanations offered indicates that no one really knows why legends like that of Jesse James enjoy such enduring popularity and appeal. All of the above explanations make sense, but no one of them by itself seems to explain the complete impact. A truly definitive explanation is lacking, and Jesse remains somewhat of a puzzle.

The puzzle itself may be part of the appeal. Jesse was different from most people, and did things most people would not dream of doing. Perhaps the popular literature writers

<sup>1</sup>Franz and Choate, pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>John G. Cawelti, "Prolegomena to the West," Western American Literature, Feb. 1970, p. 259.

<sup>3</sup>F. E. Emery, "Psychological Effects of the Western Film: A Study in Television Viewing," Human Relations, vol. 12, no. 3 (1959), p. 210.

hold the clue. Whatever else he might have been to them, Jesse was an adventurous, action-oriented and mysterious character, and those are the qualities they built into the legend and the elements that sold the dime novels, the gazettes and all the rest of the popular forms. It must be remembered, after all, that Jesse's legend did not just happen, it was practically manufactured from scratch.

Perhaps scholars should pay more attention to those elements and processes used by popular literature that made the legend so widely successful. The importance of these should not be overlooked, for they are responsible for a legend that through a century of use has remained both elusive and enduring.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A<sup>1</sup>

### Important Dates

Missouri under martial law, August 1861 - March 1865.

- 1841 - Rev. and Mrs. James emigrate to Clay County, Missouri, December 28.
- 1843 - Frank James born, January 10.
- 1847 - Jesse James born, September 5.
- 1850 - Rev. James travels to California, becomes ill and dies, spring.
- (?) 1851-2 - Mrs. James marries Benjamin Simms, a few months later they separate.
- 1855 - Mrs. James marries Dr. Reuben Samuel, September.
- 1861 - Frank James joins Gen. Sterling Price's Confederate Army, summer.
- 1862 - Price retreats south, Frank stays behind and is granted amnesty, spring.
- 1862-3 - Frank James joins guerrillas, winter or spring; with Quantrill, summer, 1863.
- 1863 - Frank participates in raid on Lawrence, Kansas, August 21.  
  
Mrs. Samuel jailed, Jesse James mistreated by Union militia, summer.  
  
General Order No. 11, August 25.
- 1863-4 - Jesse James joins guerrillas (Anderson's band, a segment of Quantrill's Raiders), winter or spring.

<sup>1</sup>Appendix A was compiled and crosschecked from William Settle's Jesse James Was His Name, Alix Daniels' pamphlet The Authentic History of Frank and Jesse James and Frank Triplett's The Life, Times and Treacherous Death of Jesse James.

1864 - Jesse wounded, right side of his chest, August.

Jesse and Frank take part in Centralia, Missouri, massacre, September 26.

1865 - Harassment forces Samuel family to Rulo, Nebraska, January or February.

Jesse seriously wounded in right chest, May or June, taken to Rulo, Nebraska.

Jesse meets and betrothed to Zerelda Mimms on return to Kearney, summer.

1866 - Liberty Bank robbed, Jameses not suspects, February 13.

1868 - John N. Edwards helps found and edit Kansas City Times, crusades for former guerrillas-turned-outlaws.

First professional detective enters hunt, after Russellville, Kentucky, robbery.

1869 - Gallatin, Missouri, bank robbery, first confirmed James robbery, December 7.

First letter of a series, purportedly from Jesse, appears in the Kansas City Times denying guilt, shortly after Gallatin robbery.

1871 - Pinkerton detectives first retained to catch "Missouri Bandits."

1873 - First James train robbery, Council Bluffs, Iowa, July 21.

1873-4 - A rash of robberies committed in Missouri and adjoining states charged to Jesse and Frank.

1874 - Outlaws and banditry become a Missouri political issue for the 1874 elections.

Jesse marries Zee Mimms, April.

Frank marries Annie Ralston, summer.

1875 - Bomb thrown into Samuel home, half-brother Archie is killed, Mrs. Samuel loses an arm, January 26.

Amnesty proposal for Jameses and Youngers brought before Missouri Legislature, but fails to capture 2/3 majority, March 20.

Jesse and Frank first in print, Guerrillas of the West, by Augustus C. Appler.

A son, Jesse Edwards, is born to Jesse and Zee James, December 31.

- 1876 - Northfield, Minnesota, bank robbery fails, Younger brothers captured, Jesse and Frank escape, September 7.
- 1877 - John N. Edwards publishes a highly biased account of Jesse and other guerrillas-turned-outlaws, Noted Guerrillas.
- 1879 - A daughter, Mary, born to Jesse and Zee, July 17.  
           Glendale, Missouri, train robbery, October 8.
- 1881 - Jesse first appears in a dime novel, Frank Tousey's Five Cent Wide Awake Library, no. 440, June 27.
- 1882 - Jesse is shot and killed by Bob Ford in St. Joseph, Missouri, April 3.  
           Frank James surrenders personally to Governor Crittenden at Jefferson City, Missouri, October 5.
- 1885 - After a series of trials, and subsequent acquittals and dismissals, final charges against Frank are dropped, February 21.
- 1898 - Leeds train robbery, September 23; Jesse's son, Jesse Edwards James, accused of the crime, but is later tried and acquitted.
- 1915 - Frank James dies a natural death, February 18.

APPENDIX B<sup>1</sup>

Robberies

- 1866 - February 13 - Bank; Liberty, Missouri; Clay County Savings Bank; \$60,000; 1 killed.
- October 30 - Bank; Lexington, Missouri; Alexander Mitchell and Company; \$2,011.50; 0 killed.
- 1867 - March 2 - Bank; Savannah, Missouri; [John McClain's Bank]; \$0; 0 killed.
- May 22 - Bank; Richmond, Missouri; Hughes and Wasson Bank; \$4,000; 3 killed.
- 1868 - March 20 - Bank; Russellville, Kentucky; Nimrod Long and Company; approx. \$12,000; 0 killed.
- 1869 - December 7 - Bank; Gallatin, Missouri; Davies County Savings Bank; less than \$1,000; 1 killed.
- 1871 - June 3 - Bank; Corydon, Iowa; Ocobock Brothers' Bank; \$6,000; 0 killed.
- 1872 - April 29 - Bank; Columbia, Kentucky; Deposit Bank; \$600; 1 killed.
- September 26 - Fair; Kansas City, Missouri; Kansas City Fair; \$978; 0 killed.
- 1873 - May 27 - Bank; Ste. Genevieve, Missouri; [name not obtainable]; \$4,000; 0 killed.
- July 21 - Train; near Council Bluffs, Iowa; Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad; \$2,000 plus passengers' valuables; 1 killed.
- 1874 - mid-January - Stagecoach; between Hot Springs and Malvern, Arkansas; passengers' valuables (less than \$500?); 0 killed.

<sup>1</sup>Appendix B was compiled from the same three sources as Appendix A.

January 31 - Train; Gad's Hill, Missouri; Iron Mountain Railroads; between \$2,000-\$22,000 plus passengers' valuables; 0 killed.

August 30 - Omnibus; North Lexington, Missouri; passengers' valuables (less than \$500?); 0 killed.

Omnibus; between Waverly and Carrollton, Missouri; passengers' valuables (less than \$500?); 0 killed.

\*December 7 - Bank; Corinth, Mississippi; Tishomingo Savings Bank; \$5,000 plus \$5,000 in jewels; 0 killed.

December 8 - Train; Muncie, Kansas; Kansas Pacific Railroad; approx. \$30,000; 0 killed.

1875 - May 13 - Bank; Huntington, West Virginia; [name not obtainable]; approx. \$10,000; 0 killed.

1876 - July 7 - Train; Rocky Cut near Otterville, Missouri; Missouri Pacific Railroad; \$15,000; 0 killed.

September 7 - Bank; Northfield, Minnesota; First National Bank; \$0; 2 killed.

1879 - October 8 - Train; Glendale (Selsa Station), Missouri; Chicago and Alton Railroad; \$6,000; 0 killed.

1880 - September - Stagecoach; Mammoth Cave, Kentucky; passengers' valuables (less than \$500?); 0 killed.

1881 - March 11 - Paymaster; Muscle Shoals, Alabama; \$5,000; 0 killed.

July 15 - Train; Winston, Missouri; Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad; amount not reported; 2 killed.

September 7 - Train; Blue Cut, Missouri; Chicago and Alton Railroad; passengers' valuables plus express (less than \$5,000?); 0 killed.

\*It would not, of course, have been possible in those days for Jesse to have been in Corinth, Mississippi, one day and Muncie, Kansas, the next. It is possible, however, that the gang had split up to commit both robberies.

## Robberies:

Total - 25

Loot - approx. \$170,000-\$196,000

By Types - 12 banks	By Years - 1866 - 2
7 trains	1867 - 2
4 stagecoaches	1868 - 1
1 fair	1869 - 1
1 paymaster	1870 - 0
	1871 - 1
By States - 14 - Missouri	1872 - 2
3 - Kentucky	1873 - 2
2 - Iowa	1874 - 6
1 - Kansas	1875 - 1
1 - Minnesota	1876 - 2
1 - Arkansas	1877 - 0
1 - West Virginia	1878 - 0
1 - Alabama	1879 - 1
1 - Mississippi	1880 - 1
	1881 - 3

## Killings:

(Bystanders killed both intentionally and unintentionally as a direct result of the robberies.)

Total - 11

By States - 7 - Missouri	By Years - 1866 - 1
2 - Minnesota	1867 - 3
1 - Iowa	1868 - 0
1 - Kentucky	1869 - 1
	1870 - 0
	1871 - 0
	1872 - 1
	1873 - 1
	1874 - 0
	1875 - 0
	1876 - 2
	1877 - 0
	1878 - 0
	1879 - 0
	1880 - 0
	1881 - 2



## APPENDIX C<sup>1</sup>

### Representative Jesse James Films and Actors

- 1911 - Jesse James
- 1919 - Jesse James
- 1927 - Jesse James, Fred Thomson
- 1939 - Jesse James, Tyrone Power, Henry Fonda, Randolph Scott  
Days of Jesse James, Roy Rogers
- 1941 - Jesse James at Bay, Roy Rogers  
Bad Men of Missouri, Alan Baxter
- 1942 - Jesse James, Jr.  
The Remarkable Andrew, Rod Cameron
- 1946 - Badmen's Territory, Lawrence Tierney
- 1947 - Jesse James Rides Again, Clayton Moore
- 1948 - Adventures of Frank and Jesse James, Clayton Moore
- 1949 - Fighting Men of the Plains, Dale Robertson
- 1950 - The James Brothers of Missouri, Keith Richards  
I Shot Jesse James, Reed Hadley  
Kansas Raiders, Audie Murphy
- 1951 - Best of the Bad Men, Lawrence Tierney
- 1953 - The Woman They Almost Lynched, Ben Cooper  
The Great Jesse James Raid, Willard Parker
- 1954 - Jesse James Versus the Daltons  
Jesse James' Women, Don Berry

<sup>1</sup>Appendix C was compiled from William K. Everson and George N. Fenin's The Western: From Silents to the Seventies and Allen Eyles' The Western: An Illustrated Guide.

- 1957 - The True Story of Jesse James, Robert Wagner  
Hells Crossroads, Henry Brandon
- 1959 - Alias Jesse James, Wendell Corey
- 1960 - Young Jesse James, Ray Stricklyn
- 1971 - The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid, Robert Duvall,  
Cliff Robertson

#### APPENDIX D

The quality, readability, accuracy and usefulness of historical accounts dealing with Jesse James vary greatly. Below are some of my own impressions and comments on the various historical sources used in this study.

Breihan, Carl W. The Complete and Authentic Life of Jesse

James. New York: Frederic Fell, 1953.

Complete but hardly authentic. This book is full of errors and inconsistencies, and resembles the old popular histories in its use of imaginary conversations and thoughts of the outlaws and other personalities. Slanted heavily in the outlaws' favor, and full of myths.

Croy, Homer. Jesse James Was My Neighbor. New York: Duell,

Sloan and Pierce, 1949.

Human interest. Contains some interesting insights into the human history of the times and people, though it offers little that is factually new.

Daniels, Alix. The Authentic History of Frank and Jesse James.

Kearney, Mo., 1973. [Mimeographed pamphlet]

Family slosh. Some of the information offered is acceptable, but overall this pamphlet is only tenuously reliable. The authoress relied heavily on oral repetitions of Frank James' recountings of his outlaw career many years after the fact. It is difficult to comfortably trust repetitions of an old man's memories.

Good Bye, Jesse James. ed. Jack Wymore. Liberty, Mo.:

Jesse James Bank Museum, 1967.

All the news fit to print. A collection of six representative contemporary newspaper articles about Jesse just following his death. Good insights into public feelings and reactions to Jesse and his

murder at the time.

Jay, Donald. Outlaws of the Border. Chicago: Coburn and Newman, 1882.

Very thick. A lengthy and detailed contemporary history about Jesse, but it shares the same errors and slanted sympathies of most Jesse James histories of that time.

Russell, Jesse Lewis. Behind Those Ozark Hills. New York: Hobson Book Press, 1947.

Tasty sidelights. Basically devoted to some of the anecdotes of the Jameses and other Missouri outlaws. Interesting but full of errors.

Settle, William A., Jr. Jesse James Was His Name: or, Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri. Columbia, Mo.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1966.

Good reading and factual. An authoritative and objective look at Jesse and Frank. The author, a true scholar and historian, comes to grips with the fuzzy area between known fact and oral tradition. Well written, carefully researched, interesting and reliable.